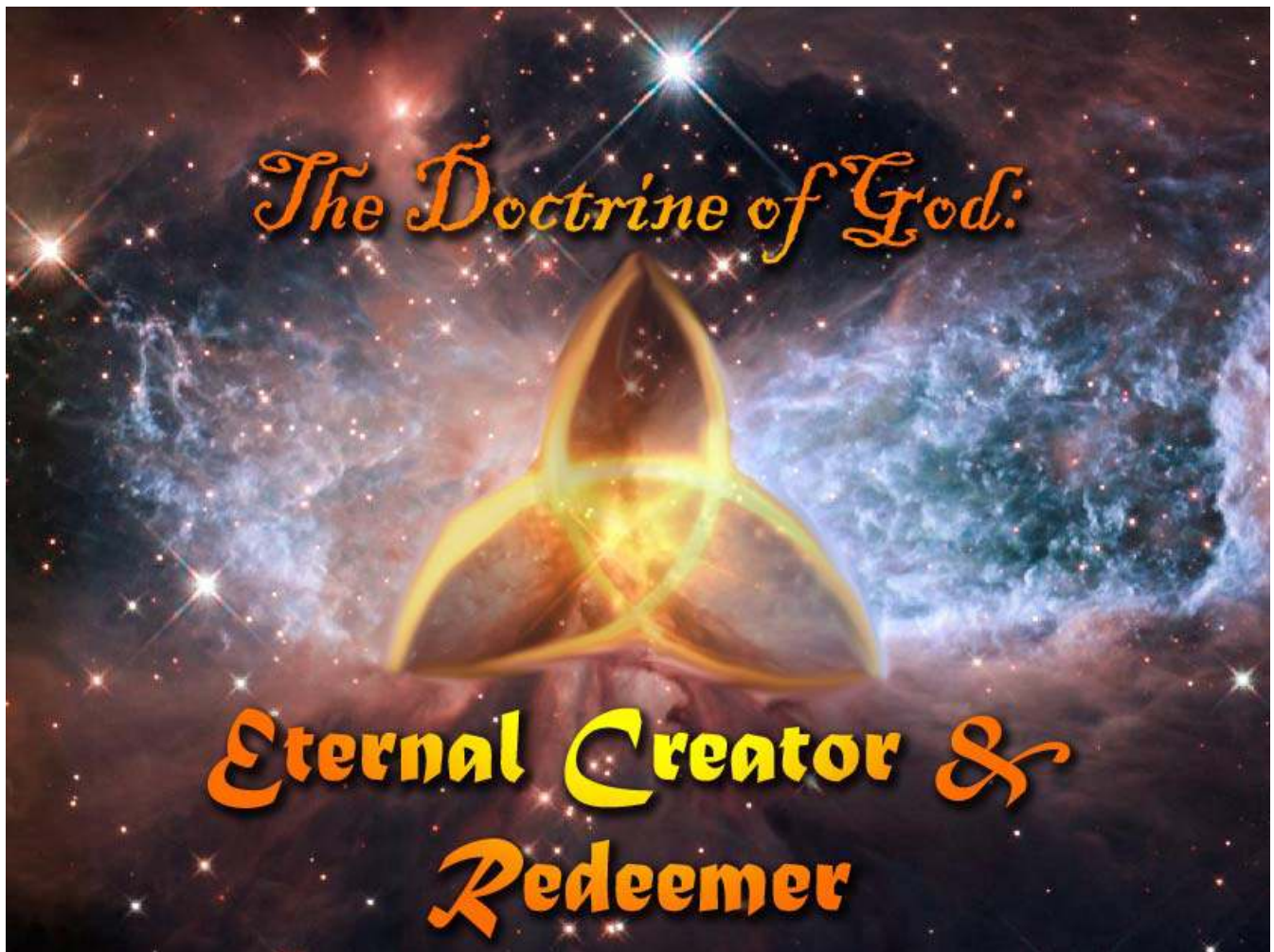


# Theology for Life

Volume 3 | Issue 4 | Winter 2016 / 2017



## Inside this Issue...

- *The Holiness of God: Awakening to His Character*
- *What Matthew Henry Can Teach Us about Prayer*
- *Searching Hearts and Testing Minds: The God of Biblical Counseling*



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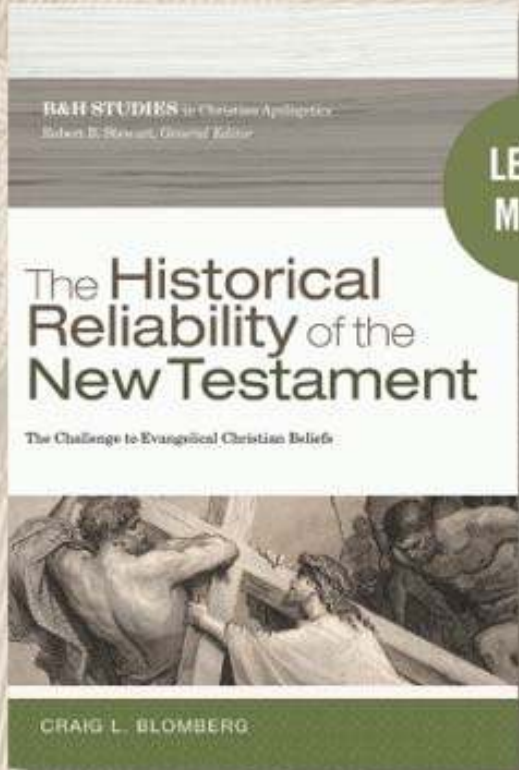
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## Editor's Corner

### EXECUTIVE EDITOR

*Dave Jenkins*

### STAFF EDITORS

*Sarah Jenkins*

*Craig Hurst*

*Michael Boling*

*Brian Cosby*

### DESIGN DIRECTOR & COPY EDITOR

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The doctrine of God has been either neglected or under attack for more than a century. Yet, it is one of the most neglected doctrines in the Church today. From understanding the doctrine of the Trinity, creation, prayer, Satan and demons, God's providence, the attributes of God, the character of God, and the knowability of God, there is a great need to understand these precious doctrines.

A recent study conducted by Lifeway Research and sponsored by Ligonier Ministries produced a report called *The State of Theology*. This report tells us a lot about contemporary evangelicals and their beliefs. For example, when asked whether God is unconcerned with "my day-to-day decisions", 8 percent strongly agreed, 12 percent agree somewhat, 23 percent disagree somewhat, 47 percent disagree strongly, and 9 percent aren't sure. On page 18 of the study, those who participated responded to the following statement, "God has authority over people because He created human beings". 36 percent agreed strongly with that statement, 25 percent agreed somewhat, 14 percent disagree somewhat, 14 percent strongly disagreed, and 11 percent weren't sure."

On another part of the study, "God is a perfect being and cannot make a mistake", 48 percent agreed strongly, 15 percent agreed somewhat, 13 percent disagree somewhat, 10 percent strongly disagree, and 14 percent aren't sure (20). Another part of the study considers how God continues to answer specific prayers. In response to this statement, 38 percent agreed strongly, 29 percent agreed somewhat, 11 percent disagreed somewhat, 10 percent disagree strongly, and 13 percent aren't sure (20). The last part of the study for our consideration considers how God does not determine all that happens, He simply knows it in advance. 22 percent agreed somewhat strongly, 27 agreed somewhat, 15 percent disagree somewhat, 19 percent agree strongly, and 17 percent aren't sure (21).

In this issue of *Theology for Life*, we are seeking to set forth the doctrine of God in all of its beauty and majesty from the Word of God. Along the way, you'll learn how the doctrine of God is not only under attack, but also how understanding this doctrine can help deepen your Christian life and ministry.

The recent research done by Lifeway highlights the need

for this issue of *Theology for Life*. Some people believe that doctrine isn't important or that it's outdated. Doctrine comes from the Bible. God is not unconcerned about our day to day lives. Instead, throughout the Bible, we see how He is invested in and active in them. His grace is strengthening and sustaining us so we can stand fast through the power of the Spirit and be witnesses in the world. God is not only interested in our witness. He is interested in our character.

People responded in the *State of Theology* study that they weren't sure about, disagreed, or strongly disagreed that God is a perfect being and cannot make a mistake. As you'll learn in this issue, God is interested in man. He has made this clear in Christ. Specifically, in this issue, you'll learn about the character and attributes of God. One example of this is the holiness of God, described by theologians as the controlling attribute of God. When Isaiah saw the holiness of God he understood in Isaiah 6 that he was a wretch in need of the Lord and he threw himself on the Lord. We see this happen over and over again in the Old and New Testaments. People understand who the Lord is and they realize their own insignificance in the light of the glory of God.

Of all the issues under attack by our culture and even in the church today, we must recover a biblical, theological, and practical understanding of the doctrine of God. Doing so will help us provide a foundation for further growth in the Christian life. A solid understanding of the doctrine of God will help us in the face of trials knowing that God is perfect, faithful, and true to His promises. He will see us through every difficulty. His promises are tied to His perfect, holy character. This means we can call on the Lord giving us assurance He will hear us and answer us in His own timing and way.

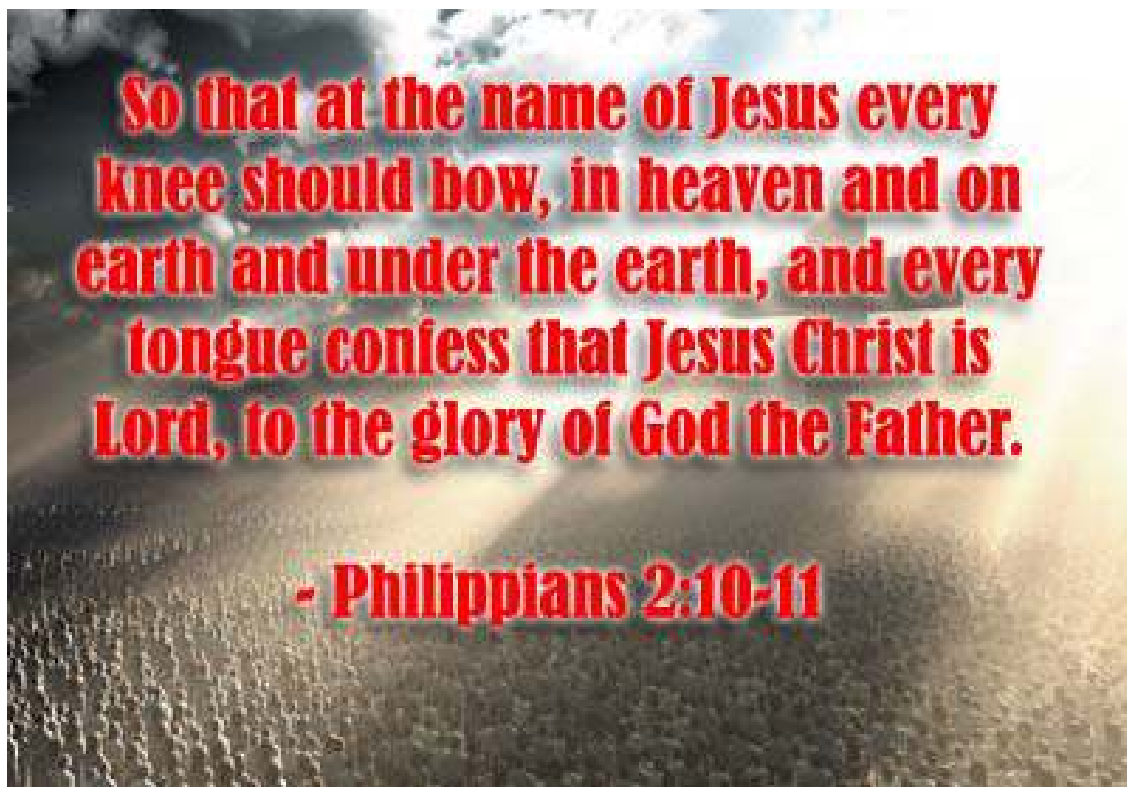
Whether you are a new Christian or a seasoned saint, there is plenty in this issue of *Theology for Life* to digest and learn from. As I prepared to write the article on the Providence of God and studied this issue in depth I was deeply encouraged by how God knows the beginning from the end. Nothing is by chance in His sight. Instead, He in His sovereign plan and wisdom has decreed that man know and serve Him. God is not absent in the sky. He is not silent. Instead, He is there. God is sovereign. He is perfect in all of His ways and all of His ways are just, holy, and good.

It is my prayer as you read this issue that your knowledge and understanding of this precious doctrine would grow. May we be as the Bereans were and study to show ourselves approved unto the Lord. As you read this issue let me encourage you to open and read your Bible. There'll you'll learn more about our great God, His glory, majesty, along with His plan for our lives.

In Christ,  
Dave Jenkins  
Executive Editor, *Theology for Life Magazine*

## **The Holiness of God: Awakening to His Character**

By Zach Barnhart



**If there is one truth evangelical Protestants can all get behind,** it is the holiness of God. To deny the holiness of God would be to deny the Christian faith and the Scriptures altogether. Countless studies and books have been tailored to exploring this particular attribute of God. The holiness of God is a staple in systematic theology books. Even amidst of all the various study on this doctrine, in my opinion, believers have oftentimes arrived at a shallow conclusion of what it means to be in relation to God Himself and to humankind.

When singing "Holy, Holy, Holy" in pews on Sunday mornings, it's easy to fall in the pattern of recitation instead of glorifying God for the richness of His holiness. "Holy" is a word we hear all the time; in fact, the word and concept itself is introduced



around 1,000 times in the Bible. This is very telling for two reasons. First, it shows just how integral holiness is to the whole of the Christian faith. Second, it shows that the tendency to gloss over it or take it for granted is easy. R.C. Sproul calls such behavior being "asleep to His character".<sup>[i]</sup> Getting a clear definition of what "holiness" itself is will awaken us to what that means about God, and further, about us.

### Holiness Defined

If someone were to ask you, "What does it mean for God to be holy?" what would you say? The most fundamental meaning of *holy* is "to cut" or "to separate". We see the word "holy" in Scripture throughout—holy ground (Exodus 3:5), holy land (Zechariah 2:12), holy nation (1 Peter 2:9), etc. Such language is used to indicate a complete "otherness" about these things; they are so separated that they are distinct

from a normal ground, land, nation, etc.

"God never calls us to be sovereign, eternal, immutable, or omnipresent."

When we apply *holy* to God, we're saying the same thing. God is transcendently separate from mankind, from the world, even time and space itself. He cannot be bound by any of these faculties because He is completely separate and "holy" to them. Further, God is so "other" than us when it comes to His morality; He's not just better than us, but totally and completely set apart (1 Samuel 2:2).

### God's Two Principles

The holiness of God is a twofold principle, like two parallel lines running eternally long. As Herman Bavinck observes, "The same holiness that is the principle of deliverance and the object of praise is, for those who violate it, a principle of destruction and the object of dread."<sup>[ii]</sup> Bavinck elaborates, "When Israel breaks his covenant, desecrates his name, and violates his laws, it is precisely God's holiness that incites him to mete out punishment. His holiness demands that Israel be holy."<sup>[iii]</sup> God is so holy, so "other" than us, that it not only invokes shouts of praise, but compels us to hail it high or suffer the consequences.

### "Be Holy, For I Am Holy."

The holiness of God is unique from His other attributes. God never calls us to be sovereign, eternal, immutable, or omnipresent. He does call us to be *holy*, and He does so often throughout Scripture. We might hear "be holy" and start thinking about how to do better or to clean our act up. Christian, you must remember that to be holy is, at its core, to strive to be *separate* (2 Timothy 1:9). As God's elect and royal priesthood, we have been set apart from the rest of mankind. We aren't called to holiness to attain God's favor, but to make much of His glory through our election (Deuteronomy 7:6). As A.W. Tozer put it, "Holiness, as taught in the Scriptures, is not based upon knowledge on our part. Rather, it is based upon the resurrected Christ indwelling us and chang-

ing us into His likeness.”<sup>[iv]</sup> God’s holiness is the agent in making His people holy.

Living a life of holiness does not look like a moral marked checklist, but exhibits itself when a lost world sees the "otherness" of the body of Christ and the gospel it proclaims and wonders with the Philippian jailer, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). Unbelievers will not be intrigued by moral perfection—in fact, they'll probably consider it to be snooty or legalistic—but they will be intrigued when they see the all-sufficiency of Christ, and that is what we must strive to display.

### What Will Our Response Be?

The holiness of God is a causal attribute, in that, believers are compelled to respond when they are awakened by it. At our core, we must do nothing more than fall on our knees and cry out, "Holy, Holy, Holy," to the One who deserves such admiration. We should not only praise His holiness, but express thanksgiving for it, that God took seriously His character to the point where His glory is His chief end. For without such emphasis on His glory, salvation itself would be impossible. We are not only moved to praise and give thanks (Psalms 99:5), but we cry out for judgment and weep for the lost in response to His holiness (Isaiah 5:16). Finally, we are careful to live as holy, set apart, distinct sons and daughters of the King; not striving for legalistic perfection but pointing to Christ as our all-sufficient Savior and Keeper.

“Finally, we are careful to live as holy, set apart, distinct sons and daughters of the King...”

#### References:

- <sup>[i]</sup> Sproul, R.C., *Choosing My Religion*
- <sup>[ii]</sup> Bavinck, Herman, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II.216-221.
- <sup>[iii]</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>[iv]</sup> Tozer, A.W., *Preparing for Jesus' Return: Daily Live the Blessed Hope*.

## The Knowability of God

By Matthew D. Adams

### What can we know about God?

The *knowability* of God is a topic in Christian theology that answers this question. Additionally, it is very much the most basic question of Christian theology. Why do I say this? The answer is quite simple; this is the most basic question of Christian theology because it determines the scope and content of our study of God. Therefore, when discussing this topic, we are exploring the degree in which mankind can know God.



The religions of the world fall all over this "knowability" spectrum. Some conclude that God cannot be known at all, and they argue that God is so exclusive from humanity that it would be ignorant to think that somehow finite humans can relate or know Him. However, Christians argue that even though we cannot *fully* known everything about God, He has chosen to reveal Himself to His creatures in ways that we can know Him personally and significantly, in a limited but ever-increasing way throughout eternity.

It is here that we must consider the theological teaching of the incompre-

hensibility of God. Some of the greatest theologians and throughout all of history have taught this theological point. However, by using this term, it seems to contradict what has just been said about knowing God. When we use the term *incomprehensible*, we are not referring to something that we are unable to comprehend, nor are we saying that God is utterly unknowable. Instead, we are saying that we cannot comprehend God *exhaustively*.

### **The Key Word Here is Exhaustively**

This theological fact—that God can never be *fully* known—is reaffirmed for us in the Scriptures. The Psalmist David writes, "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable" (Psalms 145:3). Then the Apostle Paul writes, "The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God," and continues to say, "no one comprehends the things of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:10-12). Going back to the Psalms, David underlines this truth when he writes, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it" (Psalms 139:6).

To drive this point even farther home, the Lord says of Himself, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

### **Do Not Fall into Error**

If we misinterpret the doctrine of God's incomprehensibility, we can easily find ourselves falling into two serious errors. The first error, which has been alluded to already, says that since God is incomprehensible, He must be completely unknowable, and anything we say about God is nonsense—pretty much gibberish. However, the Christian faith affirms the wisdom of God alongside the incomprehensibility of God. What does this mean? It means that our minds can go only so far in understanding God, and to know God we need His revelation. But that revelation is intelligible, not irrational. It is not gibberish. It is not nonsense. The incomprehensible God has revealed Himself truly.

"We are not searching for a hidden God."

This was a key point to the Reformation, that God is both hidden and revealed. There are mysteries about God that we do not know. However, we are not left in alone in the dark. We are not searching for a hidden God. No, God has also revealed Himself, and that is foundational to the Christian faith. *Christianity is a revealed religion.*

The point is that God remains incomprehensible because He reveals Himself without revealing everything there is to know about Him. To reaffirm this with Scripture, Moses writes, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever" (Deuteronomy 29:29). Therefore, what Moses is teaching us, is that we are not left with absolutely any knowledge of who

God is, but we have a real working understanding of God that is fundamental and practical for us.

This does raise some questions for us. How are we to meaningfully speak about this subject? In my understanding of the subject, there are two ways of looking at this topic. The first, being full of skepticism, which we have just talked about, and then secondly, we can look at it with a false assumption that we have captured who God really is. This is the second error that we must be intentional to not fall into.

See, in the error of skepticism, we conclude that our language about God is utterly meaningless and we have no relational abilities in regard to God. However, the opposite end of that spectrum is to say that we have grasped God completely. As Christians, we can say what God is like, but as soon as we equate whatever it is that we use to describe God with His essence, we have committed the error of thinking that the finite has fully grasped the infinite; which we have already seen to be impossible.

### How Can We Know God?

So, this is a heavy theological conversation, but we must be certain of one thing: God has revealed Himself to us, so that we can know Him, not exhaustively, but according to His perfect and wise counsel.

Even though God cannot be known completely, we can know *true* things about Him. Faithfully, God has revealed Himself in two ways. First, He has revealed Himself manifestly through nature. This is what we call *natural revelation*. God is the Creator of all things! He is the One that spoke it all into existence and now guides all things in this life by His sovereign hand.

Secondly, He has revealed Himself through His Word. The Westminster Divines asks the Catechism question, "What is God?" Their answer is, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. In his being, wisdom, holiness, goodness, justice, and truth." So, how can they write this? The answer is, by the Holy Scriptures. For example, we know that *God is love* (1 John 4:8), *God is light* (1 John 1:5), *God is Spirit* (John 4:24), and that *God is just or righteous* (Romans 3:26). These aspects of God have been revealed to us in Scripture. This is called, in theological terms, *special revelation*. God has truly revealed Himself verbally. He has spoken, and we have His Word—the Bible. This is information that God gives to us that we could never figure out on our own, but because of the illumination of the Spirit, we know these things about God!

I love what the prophet Jeremiah writes, as he is the mouthpiece for the Lord, "Thus says the LORD: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD'" (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

### Closing Thoughts

Before we close, we need to make these deep theological truths personal. We



can know about God, and the Scriptures actually tell us that we can know more than mere facts about God. The Scriptures tell us that we can actually know Him as a personal being! Think about what the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah! The Lord is saying that our source of joy should come from knowing God and not from our riches, wisdom, or might! Additionally, the Apostle John writes, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent," (John 17:3).

**I do not know a better way of closing this article other than another quote from the Apostle John, as he wrote his first epistle, "I write to you, children, because you *know* the Father" (1 John 2:13). God can be known, and in knowing God we find the greatest and most complete joy.**

## ***Soli Deo Gloria: More Than Just a Phrase***

By Zach Barnhart



**“To the glory of God alone.”** Most of us have heard of this phrase, also referred to in the Latin as *Soli Deo Gloria*. We hear it from athletes as they talk to reporters after the big game, or actors upon receiving an award. It is the topic of conversation in many Bible studies. It is a common refrain of church choirs singing hymns and contemporary music alike. It is the slogan that has become a new tattoo and t-shirt favorite of the young, restless, and Reformed. Nearly every Evangelical church’s

statement of beliefs will include a mention of the glory of God from the beginning.

Despite the saturation of this kind of talk that we are exposed to, what if this has led us to hold a *diminished* understanding of what this phrase is actually implying? What does it mean, after all, to confess “to the glory of God alone?”

It might be helpful, first, to determine what we mean by “glory”. Glory is often defined as “magnificence” or “beauty”. It is to be esteemed, to be honored, and renowned. When a basketball team talks about the “glory days”, for example, they are reflecting on a time of prestige and greatness that was the best of times. So glory, especially in a theological sense, has to do with *stirring worship*. It is to exude such a sense of eminence and acclaim that it drives all else to say of themselves, “unworthy”. We would consider a diamond over against a piece of concrete to be superior in glory, and if the concrete itself could talk and think, it would know it is no match for the diamond’s brilliance and beauty.

To confess *Soli Deo Gloria* is to say, firstly, that we (humanity) are like concrete in the presence of a diamond. It is to view God as the ultimate source of honor, majesty, beauty, and righteousness. When we say that God is glorious, we are recognizing that He is altogether perfect, and therefore utterly worth our worship.

The point of *Soli Deo Gloria* is not only to affirm who God is, but to acknowledge who we were made to be: image-bearers who were created for the purpose of glorifying God with our whole self. God says in Isaiah that every son and daughter of the earth is “created for my glory, whom I formed and made” (Isa. 43:6-7). It is to grant God’s glory the rightful place at the center of our lives and hearts, as it should be, as it was meant to be. It is decidedly the *point* of our existence, not just something we deflect to when we are feeling extra generous or a trendy way to sound gospel-centered.

**In fact, I would say that ascribing God’s glory to the center of your life is *dangerous*;** not because His glory is not worth our trust, but definitely because it can be risky to our comforts, our circumstances, even our ministries. If we are really to be a people set on the glory of God alone, it is going to take sacrifice, intentionality, and humility. But God is glorious, and we were created to say so. John Piper puts it this way:

*“The point is this: We were made to know and treasure the glory of God above all things; and when we trade that treasure for images, everything is disordered. The sun of God’s glory was made to shine at the center of the solar system of our soul. And when it does, all the planets of our life are held in their proper orbit. But when the sun is displaced, everything flies apart. The healing of the soul begins by restoring the glory of God to its flaming, all-attractive place at the center. We are all starved for the glory of God, not self. No one goes to the Grand Canyon to increase self-esteem. Why do we go? Because there is greater healing for the soul in beholding*

*splendor than there is in beholding self. Indeed, what could be more ludicrous in a vast and glorious universe like this than a human being, on the speck called earth, standing in front of a mirror trying to find significance in his own self-image?”<sup>1</sup>*

Piper’s point is that in the world, a “theater of God’s glory” as Calvin called it, the beauties and splendors point us to glorifying God. But it is not only creation that stirs our hearts to worship, but our very *souls* that yearn for the glory of God to be central to our being. In reading Romans 1, we see that the moment mankind rejects the centrality of *Soli Deo Gloria* as a plumb line for life is the moment man spirals into disobedience, foolishness, and ultimately brokenness (Romans 1:18-32). His glory, a combination of His beauty, His attributes, His perfections, and His works, are what drives our worship, or ultimately, what turns our hearts to stone.

The Reformed tradition affirms four additional *solas* – *sola fide* (faith alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), and *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone). All four of these *solas* can be summed up into the one *Soli Deo Gloria*. God’s grace magnifies the glory of God. Scripture magnifies the glory of God. Christ’s entire ministry was dedicated to magnifying the glory of God. And our faith should be an example of the glory of God.

*Soli Deo Gloria* must become for us more than a simple shout-out to God from the stage, or a cool-looking piece of artwork we acquire. It is not just a theological nicety that we mention in passing. It has to become, in our solar system of theology and life, the sustaining force that holds it all together, and the sun that it all revolves around. It should be the basis for our worship, not a mere component of it. It should be the reason we preach at all, not just a sermon topic. It is the reason we pursue holiness, strive to seek out the lost, and love others. *Soli Deo Gloria* is to the glory of God alone, but it is by no means a system of truth that *leaves us alone*.

**Reference:**

1. John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Crossway, 2004). p. 15.

## The Immanence of God

By David Dunham



**God as “other”, and God as “near” are two key elements of Biblical doctrine.** God is the sovereign Creator, transcendent, and distinct from His creation. Yet, God also draws near in love and judgment to His creation. Both elements are important for a Biblical understanding of the Biblical God. While Evangelicals have often rightly understood God’s otherness, it has been our progressive counterparts who are more known for discussions of the immanence of God. Since, however, both are aspects of the Biblical picture of the divine, Evangelicals need to recover a true sense of God’s presence.

### **Immanence in Contemporary Theology**

To say that progressive theologians are more known for doctrines of divine immanence is fair enough, but they have often not held to a biblical formulation of



such a doctrine. Progressive theologies of immanence tend to look more like pantheism or panentheism than Biblical Christianity. The religious philosophies of Spinoza and Hegel viewed God as identical with the world. Hegel, for example, taught that through the process of dialectical thought one would discover that all things are related, and in fact all things are God. God is inseparable from the world. Without losing the distinctions between God and the world, panentheism argues for interplay between the two, where both are affected by the other. God contains the universe, but is not identical with it. Process theology, in particular, has developed from this view to formulate a God-world relationship that offers a unique view of immanence. In such views God is very present in the world. In fact He is so present with the world that He is virtually indistinguishable from the world. God enters the world and becomes so “worldly” that He cannot be found apart from it.

If, however, progressives have gone afoul of Scripture in their formulation of immanence, Evangelicals have done so too. In an effort to maintain God’s transcendent otherness, we have let the doctrine of immanence fall short of its full Biblical glory. Kevin Vanhoozer argues that an examination of the doctrine of God’s love shows the paucity of Evangelicalism’s immanence doctrine. In

“God’s love in this formulation is one of willing the good, it is one of control and mystery.”

*First Theology*, he includes an essay on God’s love that explores the influence of Platonic thought on early Christian theology. Vanhoozer writes:

*According to Plato, love is either the desire (eros) for something I do not have or the desire never to lose what I now have in the future. Love is “always poor,” always needy. Augustine agrees with Plato that love is essentially the desire for ultimate happiness. For Augustine, however, only one’s love for God will not disappoint...Only God then should be loved for his own sake and not for the sake of something else. Now human beings are mortal. How, then, can God love us? According to Plato the gods cannot love, for they lack nothing. It is not as though God needs the human creature, for it follows from the notion of perfect being that nothing can add to God’s own enjoyment of himself. (73-74)*

Classical theism, thus, creates a tension. God’s love in this formulation is one of willing the good, it is one of control and mastery. God’s love is not moved, nor does it express desire and delight. Nicholas Wolterstorff has summarized Augustine’s view of God’s love as “non-suffering apathy”, something more akin to Stoicism than Biblical Christianity.

Following Augustine Thomas Aquinas’ perfect being theology articulated an unaffected divine love. Vanhoozer summarizes Aquinas’ view saying:

*God, says Aquinas, is like a stone column to which humans stand in relation. The column may be on our left or our right, in front of or behind us, but our relation to the column is in us, not in the column. Similarly, we may experience God’s mercy or his wrath, but it is not God who changes, only our relation to him. (76)*

Such classical views certainly help us protect the transcendence of God. He is the unmoved mover. He acts on the world, but is so separate from the world as to be

unaffected by it. In this view, God is immanent in some sense of the word, but this view surely falls far short of the Biblical picture. And while these theologians certainly spoke of God's love, it doesn't seem genuinely loving.

### A Biblical Picture of Immanence

The Scriptures, on the other hand, describe a God who is grieved (Genesis 6:6; Ephesians 4:30), who delights and rejoices (Psalms 147:11; 149:4; Zephaniah 3:17), who even changes His course of action (Exodus 32:14; Jonah 4:2). God truly interacts with the world. Evangelicals of course hold to the Scriptures that teach us that God does not change (Malachi 3:6; Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2); He is transcendent. Yet, we must formulate our understanding of divine immanence in a way that allows us to embrace the full picture of God's relationship to the world. Classical theism does not give us a sufficient answer to the paradox of otherness and nearness.

When we consider immanence, then, we should think carefully about God's interaction with time. When we speak of the God of Scripture we recognize that He exists outside of time. He is not bound to time like we are, but lives above it. He is eternal. He knows the future, and sees the beginning and the end (Isaiah 46:10). He knows the number of our days and has even predetermined them (Job 14:5; Psalms 139:16). Yet, the Bible also reveals that God operates in time with us. He interacts in the world He has made. He is not a distant deity far off watching things unfold. No, He steps into time and speaks to His people, walks with Adam, brings down justice, and most notably incarnates Himself in Jesus. God interacts in time; He is an actor in history. We may rightly say, then, that God is unchanging in His essence and nature, yet experiences change in time with us. So, John Frame explains:

"We can see God's changing in time when we consider His relationships to changing people."

*History involves constant change, and so, as an agent in history, God himself changes. On Monday he wants a certain thing to happen, and on Tuesday he wants something else to happen. He is grieved one day and pleased the next. In my view, this is more than just anthropomorphic description. In these accounts, God is not merely like an agent in time; he is really in time, changing as others change. And we should not say that his atemporal, changeless existence is more real than his changing existence in time, as the term anthropomorphic might suggest. Both are real. Neither form of existence contradicts the other. God's transcendence never compromises his immanence, nor do his control and authority compromise his covenant presence. (The Doctrine of God, 571)*

We can see God's changing in time when we consider His relationships to changing people. We are born children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3), and God judges us and condemns us in such a state. Yet, when we profess faith in God, His relationship to us changes. We are now not children of wrath, but instead children of the promise. He blesses us, in this relationship, with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3). God has built into His relationships with humanity the possibility of re-

lational change.

The prophet Jeremiah gives us some help in understanding this relational change. God often establishes conditional prophecies. For example, we read:

*Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it (Jeremiah 18:5-10).*

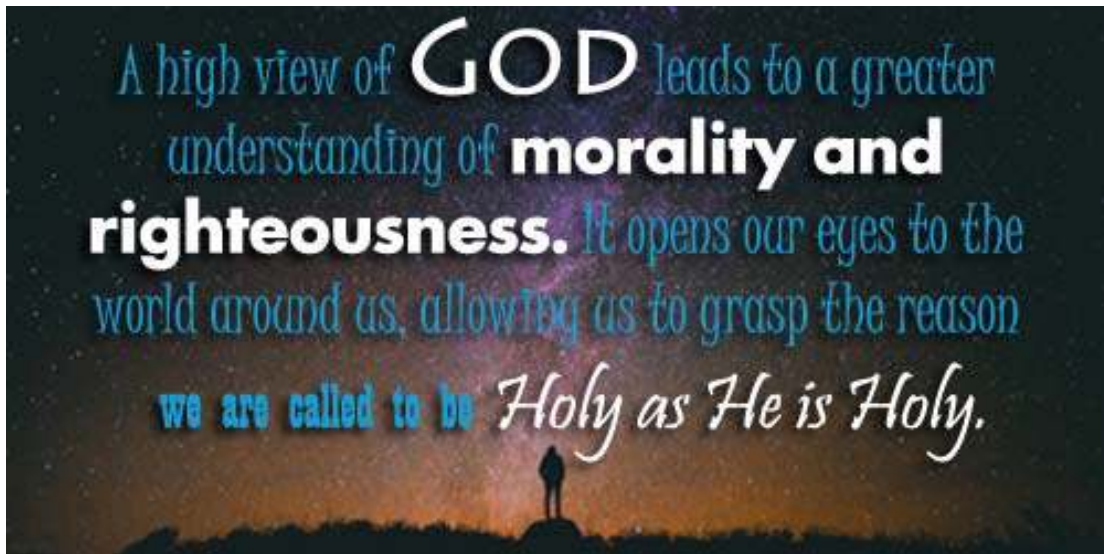
Notice several things about this passage. It is set within the context of the Potter/Clay analogy, one of the strongest analogies for divine sovereignty in the Scriptures. God's relenting is still within His sovereign control. Notice also that this prophecy is not a certain prediction, but rather a warning to Israel. As the relationships of people to God in real-time change, so God changes His interactions with them. Think of Nineveh. God's nature and essence do not change, but God does change in His relationships.

### **A Few Final Thoughts**

There are, of course, other responses to God that are not orthodox, responses that communicate God as always in process, as undefinable, or as random. Such theologies are not consistent with the Scriptural picture. Answers that assert God's inability to know and control the future, or which assert that God can make mistakes are out of step with the self-revelation of God in the Bible. This picture of immanence, however, asserts a possible solution to the tension of God's otherness and nearness. We need this doctrine of immanence. We need a fully feeling, embracing, and loving God. A truly biblical understanding of immanence gives us that. Let us as Evangelicals reclaim divine immanence as our doctrine. We need it.

## Morality and a High View of God

By Dave Jenkins



**Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of the greatest preachers and theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, taught that a high view of God leads to a high view of Jesus.** Popular culture flaunts its belief that man, in all of his glory, is the beginning and the end of all things. The Bible does not begin with man, but rather with *God* and His work of creation. The Bible continues by teaching man about God's work of redeeming man from his sin. Furthermore, the Bible stands in judgment of men; never do men stand in judgment of the Bible.

How important is a high view of God and Jesus? Since the Bible begins with God and ends with God, then it is vitally important that we have a proper understanding of God Himself, so that we might know who He is and what He is like. Dr. Harold Bergman, professor of law at Harvard University, in his book, *The Interaction of Law and Religion*, notes that one cannot have workable rules for behavior without religion, because only religion provides an absolute base on which morality and law can be based. In other words, what Dr. Bergman is arguing is that western society is doomed to relativism in law because of the loss of abso-

lute. He explains that when men break away from the idea of an authoritative religion, and even from the concept of God, they break away from the possibility of absolute truth. Their only remaining source is a slippery, unstable, and ever-changing base on which no authoritative system of law or morals can be built. Religionless law can never command law.

When God is abandoned, the truth is abandoned; and when truth is abandoned, the basis for morals and law is abandoned. A consistent, coherent legal system cannot be based upon philosophical humanism, on the principle that right and wrong fluctuate according to man's ideas and feelings. If there is no religious absolute there can be no basis for real law. People will not respect or long obey laws that are only judicial guesses. An evil, godless society, floating about on a sea of relativism, realizes that it has no foundation, no anchor, and no unmoving point of reference.

"[The world] has always been opposed to God and has never conformed to His Word."

Law becomes a matter of preference and order a matter of power. A democracy where power is ultimately vested in the people is particularly vulnerable to chaos.

Is there an absolute basis for truth, for the law, for real right and wrong; and if so what is it? Those questions are the essence of what Jesus teaches in Matthew 5:17-20. The absolute, He says, is the law of the eternally sovereign God. God has laid down His absolute, eternal, abiding law and made it known to men. And as God's own Son, Jesus declared unequivocally that He did not come to teach or practice anything contrary to the law in even the slightest way, but to uphold it entirely.

We continually hear the idea that because times have changed the Bible does not fit our day. The truth is the opposite. ***The Bible always fits, because the Bible is God's perfect, eternal, and infallible Word.*** It is the standard by which true fit is measured. It is the world that does not fit the Bible, and not because the world has changed, but because the Bible has not changed. Outwardly the world has changed a great deal since the biblical days but in its basic structure and orientation, it has always been opposed to God and has never conformed to His Word. The world has never fit Scripture.

The argument is also proposed that Scripture is but a collection of various men's ideas about God and about right and wrong. One person's interpretation of the Bible is therefore just as good as another's, and there is no place for dogmatism. Men have been left free to believe or not to believe, to follow or not to follow, any or all of Scripture as it suits them. Each person becomes his or her own judge over Scripture and the end result is to disregard it altogether.

It is impossible to take Jesus seriously and not take Scripture seriously. It is impossible to believe Jesus spoke absolute truth and not to consider Scripture to be that absolute truth, because that is precisely what Jesus taught it to be. If Jesus was mistaken or deluded on this point then there would be no reason to accept anything else that He said. At the outset of His ministry He makes clear



that His authority and Scripture's authority are the same; His truth and Scripture's truth are identical and inseparable.

**God's revealed Word, Jesus says, is not only the truth, but is truth conceived with absolute, inviolable authority.** It is in and with the authority of His Word that He came to teach and minister, and it is through that authority that He commands His Kingdom citizens to bow and obey. For thirty years, Jesus lived in privacy and obscurity. Only Mary and intimates to the family would have remembered the miraculous events that surrounded His birth and early years. As far as His friends and neighbors were concerned, He was but a unique Jewish carpenter. It was when He began His ministry, when He was immersed in the Jordan River by John the Baptist and started to preach, that all eyes suddenly turned to Him. At that point, even the leaders of Israel could not ignore Him.

Jesus' meekness, humility, gentleness, and love marked Him out in great contrast to the proud, selfish, and arrogant scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests. His call to repentance and His proclamation of the gospel made people listen, even if they did not understand or agree. They wondered if He was just another prophet or a false prophet. They wondered if He was a political or military revolutionary who might be the Messiah they anxiously awaited, who would break the yoke of Rome. He did not talk or act like anyone else they had ever heard or seen. He did not identify Himself with any of the scribal schools or with any of the sects or movements of the time. Nor did He identify Himself with Herod or with Rome. Instead Jesus openly and lovingly identified Himself with the outcasts, the sick, the sinful, and the needy of every sort. He proclaimed grace and dispensed mercy. Whereas all the other rabbis and religious leaders talked only about the religious externals, He taught about the heart. They focused on ceremonies, rituals, and outward acts of every kind, whereas He focused on the heart. They set themselves above other men and demanded their service while He set Himself below other men and became their Servant.

"Having a high view of God will help believers to stand firm as the battle over *gender neutral* language in the Bible heats up..."

What will having a high view of God and Jesus mean? Having a high view of God will help believers to stand firm as the battle over gender neutral language in the Bible heats up and also as the institution of marriage is attacked and defamed. Having a high view of Jesus will help the believer understand what the gospel is, what it demands, and how to live by it. Furthermore, having a high view of God and the work of Jesus has been a means the Lord God has used in the past to bring revival and renewal to His church. Therefore, having a high view of God and of Jesus is vital not only for the sake of the believers' growth in the grace of God, but also for the renewal of local churches.

Having a high view of God and of the work of Christ relates to morality because how one views God will affect how he/she lives. How one understands the

work of Christ will affect whether he/she will go to heaven or hell. Furthermore, understanding morality and God is important in order to have a biblical understanding of marriage, gender roles, and more. In other words, morality must be dictated by the Word of God because man left to his own devices has proven that they are destructive and unworthy due to his sin and sin nature.

**Lastly, the Bible makes it clear that when man walks his own path,** he walks the way of the fool not the path of righteousness (Psalm 1:1; Proverbs 10:9; Proverbs 12:15). The only way to be moral is not by thinking one is a good person or defining oneself by one's good deeds. Basing one's identity, worth, and value on how good one is or on how great he/she has performed is not a basis for evaluating moral behavior. The gospel is God means of evaluating man's moral behavior. The gospel addresses man's desperate state and provides the solution to man's sin with the promise of reconciliation to God through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. The only hope for man to be moral and for man's behavior to change is not through good works, but by believing in and on the works of Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection.

## The Omnipotence of God

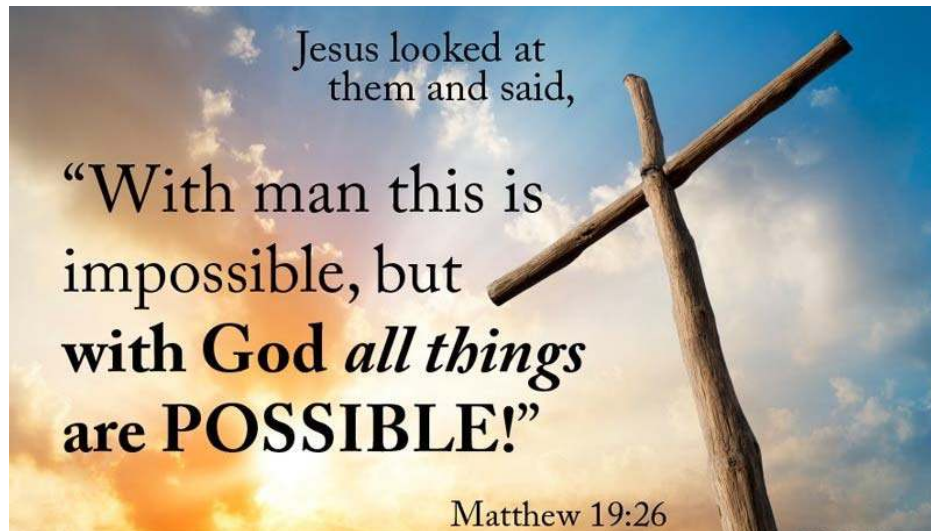
By Jason Helopoulos

**I want to fly. No, not just purchase a ticket and take a seat in**

**3B.** I want to really fly. Put out my arms, jump off the Empire State building, and fly. It isn't just the fan-

cy of it that appeals to me. Don't get me wrong, it would be fun, but I have practical reasons too. My commute home from work would be quicker. During those cold Michigan winters it would be nice to fly to Florida for an afternoon. Surely, it would increase my overall health. Others would benefit as well. I could make a quick trip after dinner to see family members in another state and still be home in time to tuck my kids into bed. The benefits are numerous. But as much as I may desire this reality, I cannot make it happen. We can all will something, but it matters very little if we can't execute the plan to accomplish it. God's omnipotence speaks of His ability to bring to fruition all that He sovereignly wills.

He is the Lord Almighty (2 Corinthians 6:18; Revelation 4:8). All things happen according to the purpose of His will (Ephesians 1:5, 11). Whatever He wills, He can accomplish. As Jesus says to the disciples, "With God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). He wills to create all things out of nothing and He does (Genesis 1). He wills to divide the Red Sea and He does (Exodus 12). He wills that Christ die for our sins, be buried, and raised on the third day and He does (1 Corinthians 15). What He wills, He accomplishes. Nothing can thwart Him, nothing is beyond Him, and noth-



ing can counteract Him. His power is sufficient and infinite.

But here we must offer a caution. God's omnipotence always works consistently with His person. As we think of the attributes of God, they are not like different garments He adorns at various times. They do not operate independently from one another. He is holy, righteous, love, true, all-powerful, etc. Therefore, when we speak of his omnipotence it cannot be parceled out from the rest of His attributes or work contrary to them. He is one person. His power is always a holy power, a righteous power, a loving power, a true power. So though

God may be all-powerful, he cannot, for example, exercise that power by lying. It is impossible for God to lie the author of Hebrews tells us (Hebrews 6:18). His power is infinite but it always works according to His person. With this in mind, we can offer the slight correction to those who would say, "God can do anything." God can't do anything. "With God all things are possible," but they must be consistent with His person.

For the Christian, there is great comfort in this truth. We serve a God, who none can thwart. This is why He can sit in the heavens and laugh at those who plot against Him (Psalm 2). His will is always accomplished. We need not fear that something will surprise Him or undo His plan for the redemption of His people. He has decreed it and so it shall be. And that power is always hedged and shaped by His holiness, His goodness, His love, and His justice. He never exercises this power on a whim. He will never decree anything that is unjust. He accomplishes all His purposes according to His will. How terrible it would be if God was all powerful and yet lacked goodness or love or justice. But equally how terrible it would be if He had love, goodness, and justice but lacked the power to enact them.

We serve an all-powerful God. Therefore, we can rest easy at night knowing He upholds the universe by the power of His Word (Hebrews 1:3). We can rest in our salvation knowing that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). We can rest in His providence, knowing that He can do far more abundantly than all that we ask, or think according to power at work within us (Ephesians 3:20). We can rest in assurance knowing that neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord (Romans 8:39). He has all-power to accomplish His will. And according to His grace, He chooses to ordain His will for our very good. How good it is to serve such an omnipotent God.

## The Omniscience of God

By Jason Garwood



**They are *everywhere*. Do you see them?** You can't miss these things. The pages of Scripture shout from the mountaintops about them. What are they? *Verses about the omniscience of God.* We'll begin with three:

- *Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.* (Isaiah 40:28)
- *He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.* (Psalms 147:4-5)
- *Will any teach God knowledge, seeing that he judges those who are on high?* (Job 21:22)

The doctrine of God's personal knowledge is the foundation of all truth, logic, rationale, and understanding (Job 36:3-5). If there is no God as the source of infinite knowledge, then we all falter under the weight of brain fizz and absurdity. The universe then becomes time and chance acting on matter—something for those with expressed interest in epistemology can debate.

The fact God *never* has to spend time searching for information is both mind-bending and comforting. This doctrine is no mere abstraction—as Calvin once put it,



“The knowledge of God is efficacious.” It’s a two-way street with many intersections. While this could never be the final word on this particular doctrine, we must understand that the omniscience of God *doesn’t* mean that God simply “knows” all things (this is true!); it also means that *because* God knows all things, His knowledge is, as Calvin said, *efficacious*, it *does* something. That’s the two-way street I’m talking about.

“Perhaps right alongside the preexistent, eternal nature of God, we could put the omniscience of God.”

### The Shocking Truth about Omniscience

God’s knowledge is perfect (Job 36:3-5). He knows everything (1 John 3:20). His understanding cannot be measured (Psalms 147:5). Nothing can be hidden from His sight (Hebrews 4:13); even our folly cannot be hidden from God (Psalms 69:5). God’s knowledge is inexhaustible (Romans 11:33-36), and because of it, He even knew you before you were conceived in your mother’s womb (Jeremiah 1:5). God knows the number of hairs on your head (Matthew 10:30) and determines the number of stars in the heavens (Psalms 147:4). God knows His plans for His people (Jeremiah 29:11) and has declared the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10).

Perhaps the most shocking thing about God is not that He knows everything, but that because He knows everything, He cannot be taught: “Will any teach God knowledge?” (Job 21:22). There is no Google search engine in the heavens because there is no fraction of knowledge in the universe that does not belong to God.

I remember as a child struggling (not with doubt, but wonder) with how God never had a beginning—He always existed outside of time and in eternity past. How much more of an inexplicable doctrine could there be? Perhaps right alongside the preexistent, eternal nature of God, we could put the omniscience of God. It is a mysterious and enigmatic doctrine; but it is also an essential one. *How could God just know everything?* I would ponder; I still have this childlike wonder today.

### God’s Omniscience and Worship

While we could list the hundreds of passages that affirm this doctrine, what has been presented so far ought to suffice? I want to finish this brief article by getting to that other side of the street. Not only does God know everything, His infinite knowledge *does* something. What does it do? John Calvin helps again, “To know [God] is immediately to love Him.” In other words, our knowledge of God comes from God’s self-revelation in both the person of Christ, and His Holy Scriptures. When that knowledge is gained through the work of the Holy Spirit, *love* is

the result.

Augustine once prayed, “Let me know myself, O God, that I may know Thee.” Someone else once said, “All knowledge is sterile which does not lead to action and end in charity.” Thomas à Kempis shares a similar thought, “All men naturally desire to know, but what doth knowledge avail without the fear of God?” Do you see the connection? Because God’s knowledge is inexhaustible, it serves as the control in this hypothesis. The presupposition is fairly obvious: we can’t know anything unless we start with God. Knowledge belongs to God because only He is truly knowledgeable, *but it doesn’t stop there.*

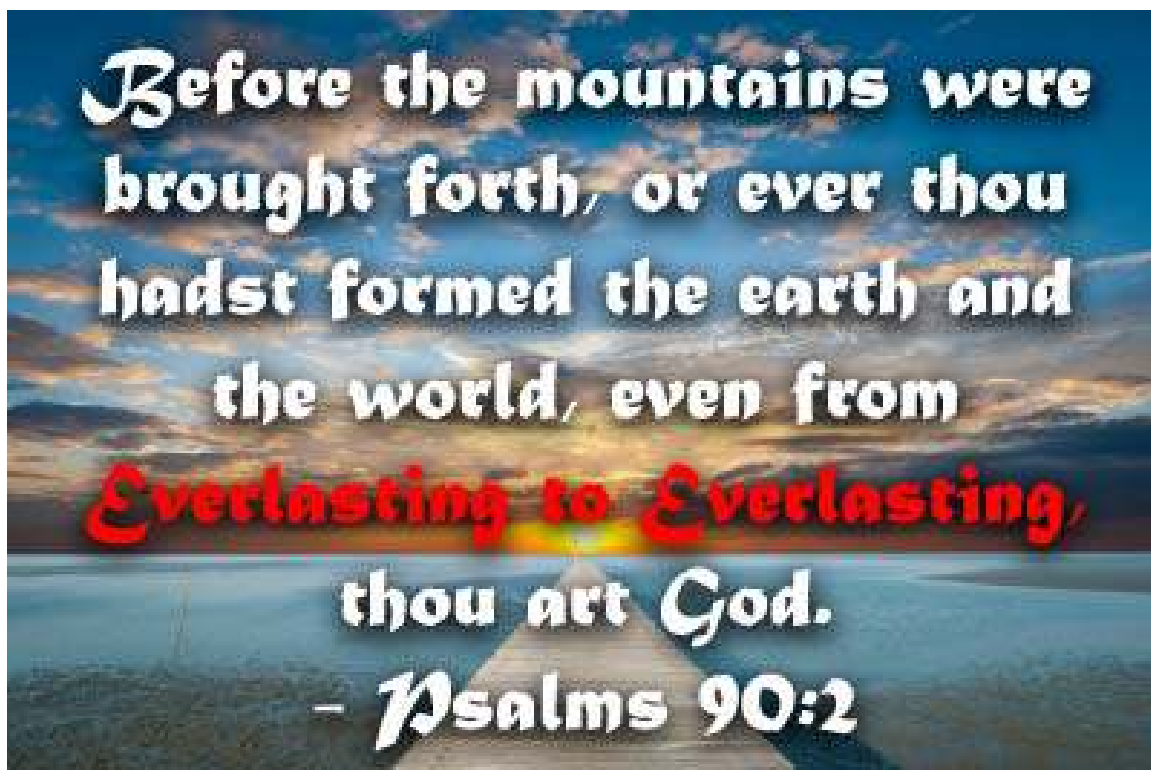
God has chosen to communicate this knowledge to man. Like all good gifts, the knowledge we received turned from worship of God to worship of self. Because of the plague of sin in man, man tries to squander this gift by attributing knowledge to other places (e.g., evolution, pluralism, relativity, etc.). “Knowledge and truth is relative,” one might say. “There are no absolutes,” someone else might quip. Instead of worshipping God through love and service, sinners attempt to take knowledge and explain it away. That’s what sin does.

The reality is, however, that knowledge of *anything* stems from the infinite mind of God. He created minds, truth, logic, fallacies, and other transcendent mysteries. Jokes, sentences, words, and verbs all belong to God. Language works because God has spoken. This is why we do not simply *systematize* the knowledge of God; we think because He thinks, and we worship because He is worthy. It is not enough to think you know something; your thoughts belong to God and are to honor Him because only God *thinks* inexhaustively.

“This is why we do not simply systematize the knowledge of God; we think because He thinks, and we worship because He is worthy.

## The Eternality of God

By Joey Cochran



**C. H. Spurgeon, when preaching on Psalm 90, said, "God was when nothing else was."** Quite honestly, this sounds like a song lyric. It's memorable, catchy even. Indeed, in my study of God's eternal character, a more striking statement on this attribute is tough to find. But that's to be expected when gleaning from the Prince of Preachers.

In regards to God's eternal character, Christians may safely confess that there never was a time when God never was. There never is a time when God never is. There never will be a time when God will never be. God is truly the eternal one. Stephen

Charnock puts it this way in his classic work, *Discourse on the Existence and Attributes of God*, “As the essence of God cannot be bounded by any place, so it is not to be limited by any time; as it is his immensity to be everywhere, so it is his eternity to be always” (349).

What does it mean for God to be eternal? Moreover, why is this doctrine not just an essential attribute of God but also a relevant attribute with bearing on how we live? In *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Wayne Grudem describes four aspects of God’s eternity, “Saying that God is eternal means that God himself is timeless, He sees all time equally vividly, He enters into history and acts within the bounds of time, and, quite possibly most applicable to ourselves, God being unlimited and unbound by time exists in contrast to his creatures who are limited and confined by time.” Francis Turretin makes this contrast vivid in *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, “He is the beginning without beginning because while he is the beginning of all things, he himself has no beginning. He is the end without end because (since he is the end to which all things are referred) he can have no end” (Vol. I, 202-203). Though we are bound in this mortal life with beginning and end, God has no beginning or end.

“God being eternal isn’t so bad, if you’re on the right side of eternity, which is incalculably more important than being on the right side of history.”

This summary launches us into why the essential attribute of God’s eternity is so applicable to our lives; it ushers us into profound implications. To refer to Spurgeon again, when preaching on Psalm 90, he says that we are but perishing seeds of grass and “grass is sown, grown, then mown.” Thus, we put our limited persons — confined by time, having beginning and end — into the loving, caring, and merciful hands of the one who is unlimited, who sits outside of time, and who will not be

bound by time. After all, the Creator cannot be limited by His creature. And time, though abstract, is nothing more than another of God’s creatures, ruled by him and sustained by him.

What is interesting about time is that time is inextricably bound to sin. You see, fundamentally, God’s creatures measure time most definitively not by sunrises and sunsets but by first sunrises and last sunsets. When you consider time, your most fundamental question is not, “Will I have enough time to get everything done that I need to today?” Your most fundamental question is, “How much time do I have?” Period. Will I have a short life? Will I have a long life? What is the span of my life? I’m not eternal like the Eternal One. I am limited. I am limited by time because I am plagued by the daunting reality of sin.

Thus, God has two important words for you in regard to His attribute of eternity and His relationship with sin, one about hell and one about heaven. God hates sin, but He does not hate sin in a temporal fashion. His wrath against sin is eternal, so He eternally punishes sinners. It’s easy for you and me to think that our sin has a limited consequence. True, sin brings you to your last sunset and final heartbeat.

That's a limitation. But that limitation is not the end; it's a buffer or better a speed bump on the road of life. Your life continues into the afterlife, which makes that speed bump a crossroad as well: everlasting wrath from an eternal God in hell or everlasting delight from an eternal God in heaven. This is why God's eternality has such great bearing on your life. God, being eternal, gives either eternal punishment or eternal reward to the crowning achievement of His creation, humanity.

So the question for you is this. Do you want to be in alignment and right relationship with the God who is eternal, or do you wish to be out of alignment and in wrong relationship with the God who is eternal? The consequence of one is grave; the consequence of the other is blessing. When we ponder God's eternality and are awed by His unlimited delight in those who are His, the words of Gandalf the White to Peregrin Took, on the walls of Minas Tirith — looking down upon a hoard that signifies impending death — are not just comforting but are filled with everlasting hope and joy.

**Pippin:** *I didn't think it would end this way.*

**Gandalf:** *End? No, the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path, one that we all must take. The grey rain-curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to silver glass, and then you see it.*

**Pippin:** *What? Gandalf? See what?*

**Gandalf:** *White shores, and beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise.*

**Pippin:** *Well, that isn't so bad.*

**Gandalf:** *No. No, it isn't.*

God being eternal isn't so bad, if you're on the right side of eternity, which is incalculably more important than being on the right side of history.



## The Goodness of God

By David Steele



**The daily headlines relentlessly pound against the shore of our lives.**

We live in a world that suffers from the curse of sin. Ours is a world filled with pain. In such a cultural milieu, it is crucial that we know and affirm the goodness of God. The goodness of God reassures us when the world appears to spin out of control. The goodness of God comforts us when evil surrounds us.

And the goodness of

God encourages us when the world seeks to squeeze us into its mold. What does the Bible mean when it affirms the goodness of God?

### Defining God's Goodness

The Hebrew word for goodness may be defined as "pleasant, delightful, cheerful, and happy." Wayne Grudem writes, "The goodness of God means that God is the *final standard of good*, and that all that God is and does is worthy of approval." A.W. Pink adds, "God...is the highest good. God is not only the Greatest of all beings, but the Best."

And the great Princeton theologian, Charles Hodges writes:

*Goodness ... includes benevolence, love, mercy, and grace. By benevolence is meant the disposition to promote happiness ... Love includes complacency, desire, and delight, and has rational beings for its objects. Mercy is kindness exercised towards the miserable and includes pity, compassion, forbearance, and gentleness ... Grace is love exercised towards the unworthy ... All these elements of goodness ... exist in God without measure and without end. In Him they are infinite, eternal, and immutable.*

The goodness of God is assumed by Christian people. To ascribe goodness to God is a basic reality. However, we need to be prepared to address a worldview which actually opposes the goodness of God. When we view God's goodness as the "final standard of all that is good," we subtly confront a relativistic worldview that rejects any final standard or authority. "If God didn't exist," writes Dostoevsky, "everything would be possible." Greg Bahnsen adds, "Even those who deny moral absolutes have at least one moral absolute: 'You should not believe there are moral absolutes. You should believe there is no morality.'" The bottom line of God's goodness: All that he does is worthy of approval. God is the highest standard of good.

### Describing God's Goodness

First, the Scriptures affirm the goodness of God. Psalms 100:5 declares, "For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations."

"The most pronounced goodness of God is reflected in the gospel."

Second, the goodness of God is reflected in creation. "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (Gen. 1:31). Third, the goodness of God is reflected in the good gifts he gives us. "Every good gift and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17).

Fourth, the goodness of God is reflected in his fatherly discipline. "For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:1-11). Fifth, the goodness of God is reflected in the ultimate gift of his Son. The most pronounced goodness of God is reflected in the gospel. "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and set his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1

John 4:10).

## Responding to God's Goodness

Consider several responses to God's goodness as we meditate on Psalms 34:8. "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!"

**Acknowledge the goodness of the Lord.** To confess that God is good involves agreeing with all that he deems good. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2).

**Taste the goodness of the Lord.** The Psalmist proclaims, "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!" (Psalms 34:8, ESV). To *taste* is "to savor." Much like fine food is to be savored, so too, we taste the goodness of the Lord. We do so by soaking our hearts and minds in his Word. We taste the goodness of the Lord by meditating on his promises and by receiving forgiveness from our merciful Savior. And we taste the goodness of the Lord by worshipping in the context of a covenant community.

**Take refuge in the Lord.** Such a person finds safety, rest, and comfort in the safe arms of Jesus. The Psalmist assures us, "This God - his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him" (Psalms 18:30). And when we take refuge in Christ we not only find ourselves in the safest place; we find ourselves in the happiest place - for "blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!"

**Refuse to question God's goodness.** When the "chips are down," and we experience bitter Providence; when life takes a turn for the worst; when we endure a season of pain - we make this resolution: We refuse to question God's goodness. We stand with the apostle Paul who says, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

## In Summary...

We are called to mirror the goodness of God by welcoming people and extending kindness. We are called to mirror the goodness of God by listening to people and loving them. We are called to mirror the goodness of God by serving people and sacri-

ficing for them. “So, then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10). And we are called to mirror the goodness of God by inviting people to the cross: “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him” (Psalms 34:8).

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1. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 197.
2. A.W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 57.
3. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 156-157.
4. Greg L. Bahnsen, *Pushing the Antithesis*(Powder Springs: American Vision, 2007), 171.

## The Love of God

By David Steele



**Have you ever looked at a diamond ring at the jewelry store, literally captured by its beauty?** As you admire this stunning stone, the salesperson places a sheet of black velvet under the diamond, which always does one thing: it accentuates the beauty of the diamond. Nothing has changed in the diamond—you merely have a renewed perspective.

The Bible declares in emphatic terms that “God is love”. My prayer is that you will be captured by the love of God. My prayer is that you will be encouraged and drawn in by the love of God. I want to accentuate the love of God by contrasting this attribute



of God with the black velvet. The black velvet will depict the condition of the creature.

### **Depicting the Condition of the Creature**

The condition of the creature is clearly taught in Scripture. The Bible says that apart from grace, *we are enemies of God*.

- “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.” (Romans 5:10, ESV)
- “Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” (Ephesians 2:12, ESV)

### **In What Respects Natural Men Are God’s Enemies**

Jonathan Edwards summarizes the enmity that sinful men express toward God.

- They are enemies in the natural relish of their souls.
- Their wills are contrary to His will.
- They are enemies of God in their practice.
- They are enemies to God in their affections.

“The natural tendency of the heart of man,” writes Edwards, “is to fly from God, and keep at a distance from him, as far off as possible... When wicked men come to be cast into hell, then their malaise against God will appear. Then their hearts will appear as full of malice, as hell is full of fire.”

### **The Degree of Natural Man’s Enmity to God**

- They have no love of God.
- Every fiber of their being opposes God.
- They are mortal enemies of God.
- They are greater enemies to God than they are to any other being.

Edwards continues, “But natural men, without a mighty work of God to change their hearts, will never get over their enmity against God. They are greater enemies to God,

than they are to the devil.”

Every person apart from grace is helpless, hopeless, and under the wrath of almighty God. Every person apart from grace resists God, rebels against God, and recoils at God’s very presence. It is crucial to understand the gravity of sin and recognize that the penalty for sin is eternal death (Romans 6:23). This is the black velvet that every human being must take into account. This black velvet of sin is at the core of our hearts, wills, minds, motivations, and consciences. This black velvet of sin fuels the thoughts, intentions, goals, and daily activities of every unconverted person. This black velvet represents the sinfulness of sin that separates people from a holy God. Let us move, then, from the *depiction of the creature to a definition of God’s love*.

### **Defining the Love of God**

Paul shows the contrast between the sin of mankind and the love of God: “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, ESV). Wayne Grudem writes, “God’s love means that God eternally gives of himself to others.” J.I. Packer adds, “God’s love is an exercise of His goodness towards individual sinners whereby, having identified Himself with their welfare, He has given His Son to be their Savior, and now brings them to know and enjoy Him in a covenant relation.”

### **Describing the Love of God**

In the 18th century, there was a preoccupation for some people with the wrath of God. In the 19th century, the liberal theologians re-focused the church on the love of God, but tragically excluded his wrath. In our generation, we need to strike a biblical balance. *The Scriptures proclaim that our God is a God of love*. Many passages bear witness to this unbelievable reality:

- “But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.” (Genesis 39:21, ESV)
- “You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.” (Exodus 15:13, ESV)
- “The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.” (Numbers 14:18, ESV)
- “Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!” (1 Chronicles 16:34, ESV)
- “Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who

trusts in the Lord.” (Psalms 32:10, ESV)

- “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations...” (Deuteronomy 7:9, ESV)
- “Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love...” (Psalms 33:18, ESV)

Several years ago, my brother-in-law expressed an interest in checking out a lake at the top of a very steep hill. Even though it was during the winter months, there was no ice or snow on the road—at least not in our neighborhood, which sat at 2,700 feet. So we made our way to the top and reached the lake, which sits at about 4,100 feet. There was quite a bit of snow at the apex and we ended up stuck in the snowy blast. We decided to hike back down the hill, in search of help. We knocked the door of a little cabin and sheepishly explained our situation. The man at the door uttered a few words that we will never forget: “I’m a retired psychiatrist. And we have a word for people like you who come up here in the middle of the winter: ‘You’re crazy!’”

“There is a word for anyone who refuses to hope in the steadfast love of God. Anyone who refuses this love is *crazy!*”

We have learned about the condition of the creature. We have learned that apart from grace, we are enemies of God; separated from God because of our sin; under the wrath of God because of our sin and unbelief. There is a word for anyone who refuses to call upon the God of steadfast love. There is a word for anyone who refuses to hope in the steadfast love of God. Anyone who refuses this love is *crazy!* So I plead with you today, to turn to God and turn from your sin. Trust in him. “Believe on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). *The Scriptures also proclaim that God is a God of wrath:*

- “...maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.” (Exodus 34:7, NIV)
- “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” (John 3:36, ESV)

“Both God’s wrath and His love work to the same end—His glory. God is glorified in the condemnation of the wicked, and He is glorified in the salvation of His people. The expression of His wrath and the expression of His love are both necessary to display His full glory.” What does the person do who minimizes the wrath of God? That person marginalizes and minimizes the magnanimous love of God. But this person also marginalizes and minimizes the splendor of God’s glory.

### **Renew Our Understanding of God’s Love**

We should stand in awe because God loves us! “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him” (1 John 3:1, ESV). Our great God has lavished His love upon us. We should not only stand in awe of God’s love; we should stand in awe that God chose to love sinners like us (Romans 5:8). He did not love the lovable. He loved the ones who despised Him. He loved the ones who refused to trust Him. He loved the ones who fled from Him. He loved the ones who crucified Him!

God has called everyone who believes in Him “the children of God”. The phrase *called* means, “to call aloud by name”. God adopts us and welcomes us into His family (Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 4:4-7). We should stand in awe because God sent His Son to die for sinners. The cross of Christ is the fullest expression of God’s love for us: “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9, ESV).

### **Rekindle God’s Universal Offer of Love**

God’s love is offered to *all* in the gospel (Matthew 22:1-14). The gospel invitation is extended to all peoples. Therefore, we should be passionate about proclaiming the message of the gospel to as many people as possible. “So the preacher has not done his work when he has spoken of Christ and proclaimed the historic facts of salvation. From there he must go on to urge the reception of Christ upon all men.”

### **Rejuvenate the Command to Love God and Love Others**

“And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets”” (Matthew 22:37-40, ESV).

Jesus made it clear what our responsibility is before Him. We are called to love God and love others. What would it look like if your grave aim in life was loving God? What would it look like to make a commitment to loving other people in the way Jesus demands? We should love one another because we are born of God (1 John 4:7, 11). The Greek term translated *born* means that we have been born of God. We have been acted upon in eternity past with results that extend into the future! How does your life measure up to the admonition of Peter: “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart ...” (1 Peter 1:22, ESV).

### A Final Thought...

Jonathan Edwards made a penetrating observation that will guide our concluding thoughts. He said, “Love is the sum of Christianity.” If you have not yet trusted in Christ for salvation, I urge you to turn from your sin and trust in Him. Fly to Christ and find your satisfaction in Him alone! Then and only then will you know true and everlasting love.

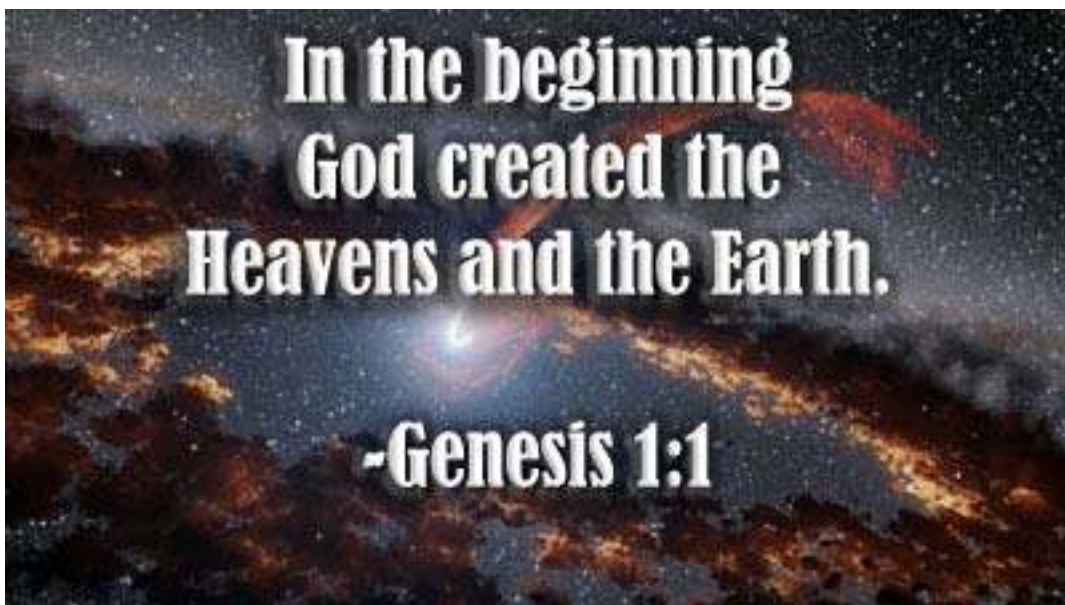
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1. Jonathan Edwards, *Men Naturally Are God's Enemies: The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, reprint 1834), 130-132.
2. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 198. J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1973), 111.
3. John MacArthur, *The Love of God* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 19.
4. The discussion that concerns the God-dishonoring movement known as “hyper-Calvinism” is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say, hyper-Calvinism holds that the gospel is only meant as a means of gathering the elect, which is to say - it is only for the elect. Spurgeon is one of the many men who refuted this erroneous view. See John 3:18; Rom. 10:13; Rev. 22:17.
5. Iain Murray, *Spurgeon vs. Hyper-Calvinism: The Battle for Gospel Preaching* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1995), 70.
6. Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and It's Fruits* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1852).



## Why, How, and When Did God Create the Universe?

By Michael Boling



**Scripture begins with a simple, clear, and important declaration.** *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.* There is no explanation of where God came from. We are simply told God did something, namely created all things. How one relates to that profound statement defines how they understand God, both intellectually and relationally, and how one approaches Scripture as a whole. Reject God as Creator and the door is opened for any number of philosophical ideologies that are eager to take root. Conversely, accepting God as Creator presents its own set of demands and realities.

Much debate centers on the how and when of God as Creator to include various positions concerning the Genesis creation account to include the age of the

Earth, the length of the days of creation, whether the Theory of Evolution can be accepted as the means by which the universe was formed, and whether Adam was a real person. This debate not only rages between those who affirm God as Creator and those who affirm the Theory of Evolution, it also takes place between those, for example, who affirm a young earth and those who affirm a much older date for creation.

Why God created the earth is another perplexing question. Was He bored? For that matter, does Scripture provide a reason why God set everything into motion? While certainly the how and when of creation are vitally important in order to understand the Doctrine of God, understanding *why* He created all things is equally vital, given it provides an underlying reason for our existence. God must have had a reason for His creative act. If Adam was indeed a real human being created by God, then it can be argued that life has a purpose, one determined by the Creator. If God is not Creator and we are merely the product of the “from goo-to-you by way of the zoo” construct outlined by evolution, then not only does such a position impact how we understand God, it deprives mankind of any sense of purpose and meaning.

These are big and important topics that, if covered in all their possible detail, would take volumes. With that said, Scripture does have a tremendous amount to say about the why, how, and when of creation and each of these three issues relates directly to a biblically-sound Doctrine of God. This article will discuss the how, when, and why of creation and how those three issues relate to the Doctrine of God.

### **How Did God Create the Universe?**

As noted above, Genesis 1:1 declares that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The first chapter of Scripture goes on to describe God’s creative act with each activity taking place within the confines of a day. Each day begins with God saying something with an action then taking place. Psalm 33:9 references the creation acts by noting, “For He spoke, and it came to be; He commanded, and it stood firm.” Moreover, Hebrews 11:3 declares, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed by God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.”

There are a couple of important truths that can be ascertained from Genesis 1, Psalm 33:9, and Hebrews 11:3. First, God spoke creation into existence. There was not a coalescence or random act of various particles in the pre-existing universe somehow smashing into each other at just the luckiest of moments. Scripture declares God spoke and creation came into existence. In fact, the Greek term used in

Hebrews 11:3 is translated as word is *rhema*, a noun that means “the word by which something is commanded”. God spoke and the universe came into existence.

The Hebrew term used in Psalm 33:9 is even more descriptive. It is the Hebrew verb *tsavah*, which means “to command, charge, give orders, lay charge, give charge to, to order.” God commanded by giving an order for the universe to come into being and that is precisely what transpired. As noted by John Currid, “God’s creative work was effortless; he spoke, and the universe came into existence.”[1]

Second, God created everything by what theologians call *ex nihilo* or “out of nothing”. This is rooted in passages such as Hebrews 11:3, which state that God created the universe (and all things therein) not out of what was visible, but rather by His word/command. If Scripture is to be affirmed, the Theory of Evolution, with its demand for all things to have derived from pre-existing matter, cannot be true; and furthermore, it cannot be intermingled or combined with Scripture. The two perspectives on origins are diametrically opposed, thus leaving no room for positions such as Theistic Evolution to be considered a viable position on how God created the universe.

Scripture puts the *how* of creation quite plainly – God spoke and all things came into being. This creative act speaks to attributes of God, such as His eternality, omnipotence, omniscience, and transcendence, just to name a few.

### **When Did God Create the Universe?**

Those who adhere to an evolutionary ideology declare the universe is billions of years old with how many billions shifting to the left or right a few billion at a time as needed. Within the camp of those who believe God created, or at least was involved to some degree in creating all things, there is also a wide spectrum of dates attached to the age of the universe. How one lands on this issue is often rooted in two main issues – how the *days* of creation are defined and how much evolutionary ideas are inculcated into a position on origins.

The disagreement between Old Earth Creationism and Young Earth Creationism centers largely on the respective interpretations and usage of the Hebrew word *yom*, typically translated by scholars as meaning day. Old Earth Creationists allege *yom* denotes a much longer period of time than a 24 hour solar day. Support for this assertion is found by relating the various uses of *yom* within scripture, which contextually indicate varying lengths of time such as Psalm 90:4, perhaps the most popular argument against a young earth. This verse, cited by the Apostle Peter, in 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 3:8 states, “A day (*yom*) is like a thousand years...” Creationist and author Terry Mortenson notes that instead of referring to the days of creation, Peter is instead “saying something about the

timeless nature of God and that He does not work in the world according to our timetable of when events should occur.” [2]

Old Earth Creationists also look for support for their assertions concerning the interpretation of *yom* by claiming that the days depicted in the Genesis creation account were “God’s days” and should not be viewed within the parameters of the modern day concept of a 24 hour period of time. In support of his position, Hugh Ross writes “the same author of Genesis (Moses) wrote in Psalm 90:4, ‘For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch [4 hours] in the night.’ Moses seems to state that just as God’s ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:9), God’s days are not our days.”[3] Such a viewpoint ignores that God meant “day from our perspective, since we are the creatures in the created space-time dimension who experience time. He even told us that they were ordinary days by the comparison in Exodus 20:8-11 in the same Decalogue”[4] as Genesis.

“Such statements make it quite obvious that the proponents of Old Earth Creationism fall prey to the influence of evolutionary dogma.”

Old Earth Creationists also point to what they claim is vast scientific evidence which supports an old age for the universe. Supporters of this view, such as Robert Newman, note the distance between galaxies and the extreme lengths of time it takes for light to travel from distant galaxies to our own place in the universe. Newman comments that the “most distant galaxies and quasars we can see seem to be over ten billion light-years away, which suggests that the universe is at least that old.”[5] He goes on to comment that “when we look at the star Sirius we see what it was doing twelve years ago...as most of the universe is more than ten thousand light-years away, most of the events revealed by light coming from space would be fictional (under the view of Young Earth Creationism)...I prefer to interpret nature so as to avoid having God give us fictitious information.”[6]

Such statements make it quite obvious that the proponents of Old Earth Creationism fall prey to the influence of evolutionary dogma. Their continued attempts to interpret *yom* from within their presuppositions rather than from a holistic hermeneutical approach to scripture is an overt attempt to merge billions of years with scriptural teaching, an activity which rejects authorial intent resident within the pages of scripture. Jason Lisle comments, “It is perfectly acceptable for us to ask, ‘Did God use natural processes to get the starlight to earth in the biblical timescale? And if so, what is the mechanism?’ But if no natural mechanism is apparent, this cannot be

used as evidence against supernatural creation. So, the unbeliever is engaged in a subtle form of circular reasoning when he uses the assumption of naturalism to argue that distant starlight disproves the biblical timescale.”[7]

The interpretation of *yom* in the periscope of Genesis 1 as a literal 24 hour period of time is further strengthened by the continuous usage of the phrase “And there was evening, and there was morning” leaving little doubt the author intended to describe a single day rather than an elongated period of time.

If we take Scripture for what it says, then at the beginning of time, God created everything within the span of six literal days. Moreover, if we affirm that *yom* refers to an actual 24-hour day, then we can also affirm the genealogical records provided in Scripture which leave us not with a billions of years old universe, but a much younger creation in the realm of 6-10,000 years. Evolution is dependent on billions of years for chance to take its course. Biblical creation is only dependent on God said and an acknowledgement of the truthfulness of Scripture. The *when* of creation speaks to the attributes of God such as His eternality, omnipotence, omniscience, transcendence, and veracity.

### **Why Did God Create the Universe?**

This question is arguably most important. Why did God create all things? What is the purpose of bringing all things to be and how does that relate to that which God created? Scripture provides an amazingly clear answer to this question in Revelation 4:11, which declares, "You are worthy, *ADONAI Eloheinu*, to have glory, honor and power, because you created all things yes, because of your will they were created and came into being!" This passage reveals God created all things for His glory and so that His creation in response might give Him the glory and honor due His holy name.

Concomitant to that reality is the fact man was created in the image of God for a purpose. John Piper states, “The point of an image is to image. Images are erected to display the original. Point to the original. Glorify the original. God made humans in his image so that the world would be filled with reflectors of God. Images of God. Seven billion statues of God. So that nobody would miss the point of creation.”[8]

Furthermore, God created all things because it was the outworking of His eternal divine plan of redemption, established before the foundation of the world. This truth is found in passages such as Ephesians 1:4, which states, “In the Messiah he chose us in love before the creation of the universe to be holy and without defect in his presence.” God did not just decide one day to create the universe just to have something construc-



tive to do with His eternal time. He created all things because He had chosen a people to be His from before the time He declared the universe to come into being. Creation is the outworking of God's divine plan of redemption, established in eternity past.

Finally, God created man so that He could pour out His love upon them within the bond of loving relationship and communion. This truth is expressed in the means by which God created man. Genesis 2:7 describes this act by stating, "Then ADONAI, God, formed a person (Hebrew: *Adam*) from the dust of the ground (Hebrew: *adamah*) and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, so that he became a living being." The Hebrew word *yatsar*, which is translated as "formed" means literally to form or fashion something in the same manner as a potter creates a beautiful masterpiece out of clay. Isaiah 64:8 reflects this relationship between Creator and man by noting, "But now, ADONAI, you are our father; we are the clay, you are our potter; and we are all the work of your hands." God spoke the universe into existence. He fashioned man with His hands. The *why* of creation speaks to the attributes of God such as His eternality, omnipotence, omniscience, love, mercy, and grace.

### **So What Does This All Mean?**

So what is the big deal? God created everything by His word speaking the universe into being and fashioning man with His hands. Creation took place 6-10,000 years ago. God did all this for His glory, to reflect His image on earth, and as part of His plan of redemption.

What does that mean for me? Such a question is a necessary one. In fact, if that question is not asked, this discussion is nothing more than an intellectual exercise. God desires something more than for us to have head knowledge of how, when, and why He created. These facts have to translate into action and they must have an impact on how we understand and relate to God.

Jonathan Edwards states enlighteningly, "God communicates himself to the understanding of the creature, in giving him the knowledge of his glory; and to the will of the creature, in giving him holiness, consisting primarily in the love of God; and in giving the creature happiness chiefly consisting in joy in God. These are the sum of that emanation of divine fullness called in Scripture, the glory of God." [9]

God established a plan of redemption from before the foundation of the world. The reason for creating all things is for His glory shone most brightly through the cross. As image bearers of God who have been given this marvelous gift of grace, we are to be a people who not only intellectually understand the *how, when, and why* of

creation, but also to be a people in love with our Creator, who desire with every fiber of their being to glorify Him through obedience to His Word. We are to desire to share the how, when, and why of why God created to a world that so often rejects those truths for the lies of the godless Theory of Evolution.

**As John Piper so brilliantly reminds us,** “All things are created and guided and sustained for the glory of God, which reaches its apex in the glory of his grace, which shines most brightly in the glory of Christ, which comes to focus most clearly in the glory of the cross.”[10] To properly grasp the Doctrine of God, we must begin within Him as Creator since, after all, Scripture begins with “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”, and it concludes with God completing His divine plan of redemption with a restored universe with man once again abiding with His Creator on earth as it was in the beginning.

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- [5] Robert Newman, "Progressive Creationism" in Three Views on Creation. Ed. by J.P. Moreland and John Reynolds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 108.
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- [10] Piper.

## Patristic Contributions to Trinitarian Theology

By Brian Cosby

**The historical development of Trinitarian theology was anything but unencumbered and straightforward.**

Articulating and explaining how one God exists in three persons—who are equal in substance, essence, and glory from all eternity—



was the primary theological task of the first five centuries. Heretical factions, such as Modalism and especially Arianism, played important roles in the doctrine's development and codification as well as the vigorous and determined study of the Old and New Testaments. From Theophilus and Irenaeus to the Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine, the Patristic conversation unequivocally concentrated on the Trinitarian debate and was tantamount with the historical milieu, seen particularly in the councils of Nicaea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.). The following is a brief survey of the key people, debates, terminology, and councils that were influential in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the first five centuries.

### Terminology and Conceptualization: The First Three Centuries

Although adumbrations of the Trinity may be seen throughout the Old Testament, "Christian trinitarianism distances its theology from any kind of Judaism." For Judaism and Islam, the essence of theology is a belief in the absolute oneness of God. Thus, the Christian understanding of a triune God holds a unique form of monotheism

that is different from any religious doctrine of God before Christ.

It is important to note that the development of the doctrine of the Trinity developed, in part, as a reaction against various heresies. Roger Olson and Christopher Hall summarized it well in *The Trinity*, “Heresy is the mother of orthodoxy. The doctrine of the Trinity developed gradually after the completion of the New Testament in the heat of controversy.” Though the word “triad” was first used by Theophilus (*circa* 180 A.D.), Scripture’s perspicuity has revealed the doctrine to Christian theologians seen as early as 96 A.D. in the writings of Clement of Rome. It was not until the writings of Irenaeus (*circa* 130-200 A.D.), however, that we first find a more definite attention to the subject. He seems to have understood the need for treating the concept of the Trinity from early baptismal creeds, namely those found in the *Didache* (*circa* 1<sup>st</sup> century) and even wrote his own baptismal liturgies that were heavily Trinitarian.

Even as early as the mid-second century we see a subtle division between the Eastern and Western churches. By the beginning of the third century, Trinitarian tentatiousness became more apparent; the Eastern churches focused on the distinction of the three persons in the Godhead while the Western churches stressed the monarchy, or absolute unity, of God. This distinction between the East and West is important for understanding the context of key Trinitarian figures and debates.

By the beginning of the third century, the Patristic Trinitarian conversation had become deeply imbued by the Western church father Tertullian (*circa* 160-225 A.D.). Both Irenaeus and Tertullian approached the Triune God from two directions: (1) seeing God as He exists in His eternal being (or “immanent Trinity”) and (2) as He reveals Himself in the process of creation and redemption (or “economic Trinity”). Tertullian was trenchant in his articulation of the Trinity and faced the challenge of defending Christian monotheism against a number of Gnostic polytheists, while simultaneously maintaining the personal distinctions between the Father, Son, and Spirit. Modalism, which was proposed by Noetus, Sebellius, and Praxeas, taught that the Father, Son, and Spirit were three modes or roles (as opposed to persons) that a unipersonal God played at different times. Tertullian, in refuting this, was the first to employ significant terminology to the Trinitarian debate, such as the words “*trinitos*,” “*substantia*,” and “*personae*” and expressed the three-in-one relationship as “one substance in three persons.”

“As the Church’s most voluminous writer, Origen’s contributions to the Trinitarian conversation cannot be ignored.”

In the Eastern Church, no one stands greater in Patristic theological development than Origen (*circa* 185-254 A.D.). As the Church’s most voluminous writer, Origen’s contributions to the Trinitarian conversation cannot be ignored. He developed the idea of the

eternal nature of the Son who was begotten out of the invisible and incorporeal without any corporeal feeling. There is much in Origen's writings, though, that is often inconsistent and even closer to the later Arian heresy than to Irenaeus or Tertullian. He occasionally argued that there are degrees of divinity: the Son is subordinate to the Father and the Spirit is subordinate to the Son. Ultimately, he failed to explain adequately how there could be this kind of proportionality within the shared divine nature of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and incidentally, provided a stepping-stone for the most famous of early church heresies: Arianism.

### **Heresy: The Road to a Consensus**

The conversion of Constantine marked a turning point in the history of the church. Alongside the end of formal persecution, the emperor became increasingly involved in the affairs of the church, believing it to be his duty to keep the church united. After moving his capital to the East, he was troubled by the dissention that arose out of a controversy between Alexander of Alexandria and his presbyter Arius. Sometime between 318 and 323 A.D., Bishop Alexander of Alexandria called upon several presbyters, especially Arius (*circa* 260-336 A.D.), to give an account of their opinions about the interpretation of Proverbs 8:22, "The LORD fathered ("created" in LXX) me at the beginning of his work." The debates that followed led to the Arian controversy.

The foundational principle guiding Arius' teachings was his affirmation of the absolute uniqueness and transcendence of God, the un-originated source of all creation. He acknowledged one God, who alone is self-existent, eternal, and without beginning. And because God is indivisible, His being cannot be shared. If God were to impart His substance to some other being, that meant that He must change, which is impossible. Jesus, therefore, was not fully God and was lower in being and substance.

To settle the debate, Constantine called together the first ecumenical council—the Council of Nicaea—which met in May of 325 A.D. The conclusion of this council condemned Arius and his teachings, but had also produced very significant concepts and terminology. One of these terms was *homoousios*, which expressed the idea that the Son of God bears no resemblance to the creatures, but that He is in every way assimilated to the Father alone who begat Him, and that He is not out of any other *ousia* (being), but out of the Father.

Among those defending the statements formulated at Nicaea was Athanasius, who became the greatest and most consistent theological opponent of Arius. His biblical defense came primarily from the prologue of John's gospel, "The Word was God" and "The Word became flesh." These passages, in his interpretation, revealed the full divinity of the Son.

The debate between Athanasius and Arius' follower, Eusebius, enveloped much of the mid-fourth century. Though Arianism spread through much of the church, a new generation of theologians rose in defense of Nicaea and Athanasius, particularly the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. The need for a final sorting out of Trinitarian thought and a clarification of increasingly blurred terminology, such as *hypostasis* and *ousia*, was in order. Thus, the Nicene supporter and emperor, Theodosius I, called together the second ecumenical council at Constantinople in 381 A.D. This council reaffirmed the council of Nicaea and maintained the keyword, "*homoousios*" in its clauses. These doctrinal decisions marked the end of the Arian attempt to seize the church of the empire.

The work of the Cappadocian Fathers expounded a more concise theology of the triune nature of God. However, classical Trinitarianism, as it has been understood, owes its articulation chiefly to the early church father, Augustine (354-430 A.D.). Devoting nearly thirty years (400-428 A.D.) to what would become a theological landmark, Augustine's *De Trinitate* stands out, even among great Trinitarian works. In it, Augustine attempts to state and explain the church's basic doctrine of the Trinity, to demonstrate that this doctrine is firmly grounded in Scripture, to clarify language and rules of logic that must be observed when speaking of the Triune God, and to discover vestiges of the Triune God in humankind, His creation. It is hard to overestimate the influence and impact Augustine's view of the Trinity has had on the church ever since its publication. He had no real successors until the ninth century and it appears that most of his readers during that time agree that nothing else needed to be said on the subject.

### **In Summary...**

The road to a consensus of Trinitarian understanding was imbued with heresy and debate. To be sure, the development of the doctrine of the Trinity is indebted to the Patristic contribution in its terminology, conceptualization, and articulation. The sheer volume of recorded documents, manuscripts, and books on the Trinity found in the writings of the early church fathers, reveals the intensity and attention with which the Christian community gave to its study. Although we may appreciate the work of this broader community, the doctrine's development was predominantly promulgated by Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, and Augustine. That our Trinitarian understanding today to a large degree reflects the exact understanding of the church of mid-fifth century illustrates the magnitude and significance of this Patristic theological task.

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## The Providence of God

By Dave Jenkins



**Over the past century, we've seen multiple attacks on the doctrine of the providence of God.** The truth is though these attacks are unwarranted. The providence of God is a great comfort to the people of God. John Flavel, a prominent Puritan writer and author of *The Mystery of Providence*, said of Providence, "It is the duty of the saints, especially in times of straights, to reflect upon the performances of Providence for them in all the states and through all the stages of their lives." Clearly understanding this doctrine is vital. In this article, I'll trace the doctrine of providence in the Bible, in church history, and then conclude by explaining how a biblical understanding of Providence will help

us in our daily lives as Christians.

### Providence in the Bible

God is the all-powerful Creator. This means that He also preserves and governs in the universe. Though the term providence is not found in Scripture, it has been traditionally used to summarize God's ongoing relationship to His creation. When we accept the biblical doctrine of providence, we avoid four common errors in thinking about God's relationship to creation. The biblical doctrine is not deism (which teaches that God created the world and then essentially abandoned it), nor pantheism (which teaches that the creation does not have a real, distinct existence in itself, but is only part of God), but Providence, which teaches that though God is actively related to—and involved in—the creation at each moment, creation is distinct from Him. The biblical doctrine does not teach that events in creation are determined by chance (or randomness), nor are they determined by an impersonal fate (or determinism), but by God, who is the personal yet infinitely powerful Creator and Lord.

Wayne Grudem helpfully offers the following definition of providence. He says, "God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that He 1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which He created them; 2) cooperate with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and 3) directs them to fulfill his purposes." Under the general category of providence we have three subtopics, according to the three elements in the definition above: 1) Preservation, 2) Concurrence, and 3) Government.

### Preservation

God keeps all created things existing and maintaining the properties with which He created them. Hebrews 1:3 tells us that Christ is "upholding the universe by the word of His power." The Greek word translated "upholding" is *phereo* also meaning "carry or bear". This is commonly used in the New Testament for carrying something from one place to another, such as bringing a paralyzed man on a bed to Jesus (Luke 5:18), bringing wine to the steward of the feast (John 2:8), or bringing a cloak and books to Paul (2 Timothy 4:13). It does not mean simply "sustain", but has the sense of active, purposeful control over the thing being carried from one place to another. In Hebrews 1:3, the use of the present participle indicates that Jesus is "continually carrying along all things" in the universe by His word of power. Christ is actively involved in the work of Providence.

"Christ is actively involved in the work of Providence."

In Colossians 1:17, Paul says of Christ that “in him all things hold together.” The phrase “all things” refers to every created thing in the universe (v.16), and the verse affirms that Christ keeps all things existing; in Him, they continue to exist or endure. Both verses indicate that if Christ were to cease His continuing activity of sustaining all things in the universe, then all except the Triune God would instantly cease to exist. Such teaching is also affirmed by Paul when he says, “In Him we live moved and have our being” (Acts 17:28), as well as by Ezra, who proclaimed, “You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.” (Nehemiah 9:6). Peter also says that “the heavens and earth that now exist...” are “...being kept until the Day of Judgment” (2 Peter 3:7).

One aspect of God’s providential preservation is the fact that He continues to give us breath each moment. Elihu, in his wisdom, says of God (in Job 34:14-21):

*“If he should set his heart to it and gather to himself his spirit and his breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust. ‘If you have understanding, hear this; listen to what I say. Shall one who hates justice govern? Will you condemn him who is righteous and mighty, who says to a king, ‘Worthless one,’ and to nobles, ‘Wicked man,’ who shows no partiality to princes, nor regards the rich more than the poor, for they are all the work of his hands? In a moment they die; at midnight the people are shaken and pass away, and the mighty are taken away by no human hand. ‘For his eyes are on the ways of a man, and he sees all his steps.’”*

God, in preserving all things He has made, also caused them to maintain the properties with which He created them. God preserves water in such a way that it continues to act like water. He causes grass to continue to act like grass, with all its distinctive characteristics. He causes paper to act like paper so that it does not spontaneously dissolve into water and float away or change into a living thing and begin to grow! Until it is acted upon by some other part of creation and thereby its properties are changed (for instance, until it is burned with fire and it becomes ash), paper will continue to act like paper so long as God preserves the earth and the creation that He has made.

We should not think of God’s preservation as a continuous new creation: He does not continuously create new atoms and molecules for every existing thing every moment. Rather, He preserves what has already been created. We must also appreciate that created things are real and that their characteristics are real. For example, if I bump my head against a rock, I do not just imagine that it hurts—it does hurt. Because God keeps this rock maintaining the properties with which He created it, the rock has been hard since the day it was formed, and (unless something else in creation interacts with it and changes it) it will be hard until the day God destroys the heavens and the earth (2 Peter 3:7, 10-12).

God's providence provides a basis for science: God has made and continues to sustain a universe that acts in predictable ways. If a scientific experiment gives certain results today, then we have confidence that (if all the factors are the same) it will give the same result tomorrow and a hundred years from tomorrow. The doctrine of Providence also provides the foundation for technology: I can be confident that gasoline will make my car run today just as it did yesterday, not simply because "it has always worked that way," but because

"God cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act like they do."

God's providence sustains a universe in which created things maintain the properties with which He created them. The result may be similar in the life of an unbeliever and the life of a Christian: we both put gasoline in our cars and drive away. But he will do so without knowing the ultimate reason why it works that way, and I will do so with knowledge of the actual final reason (God's providence) and with thanks to my Creator for the wonderful creation that He has made and preserves.

### Concurrence

God cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act like they do. This second aspect of providence, concurrence, is an expansion of the idea contained in the first aspect, preservation. In fact, some theologians such as John Calvin treat the fact of concurrence under the category of preservation, but it is helpful to treat it as a distinct category.

In Ephesians 1:11 Paul says that God "accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will." The word translated "accomplishes" (*energeo*) indicates that God "works" or brings about all things according to his own will. No event in creation falls outside of his providence. Of course, this fact is hidden from our eyes unless we read it in Scripture. Like preservation, God's work of concurrence is not clearly evidence from observation of the natural world around us. In giving scriptural proof for concurrence, we will begin with the inanimate creation, then move to animals, and finally to different kinds of events in the life of human beings.

1. **Inanimate Creation:** There are many things in creation that we think of as merely "natural" occurrences. Scripture says that God causes them to happen. We read of "fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!" (Psalm 148:8). Similarly, Job 37:6-13 states, *"For to the snow, he says, 'Fall on the earth,' likewise to the downpour, his mighty downpour. He seals up*

*the hand of every man, that all men whom he made may know it. Then the beasts go into their lairs, and remain in their dens. From its chamber comes the whirlwind, and cold from the scattering winds. By the breath of God ice is given, and the broad waters are frozen fast. He loads the thick cloud with moisture; the clouds scatter his lightning. They turn around and around by his guidance, to accomplish all that he commands them on the face of the habitable world. Whether for correction or for his land or for love, he causes it to happen.*” Again, the Psalmist declares that, “Whatever the Lord pleases he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all the deeps” (Psalm 135:6), and then in the next sentence he illustrates God’s doing of his will in the weather, “He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses” (Psalm 135:7). God also causes the grass to grow: “You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate, that He may bring forth food from the earth” (Psalm 104:14). God directs the stars in the heavens, asking Job, “Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season, or can you guide the Bear with its children?” (Job 38:32). Moreover, God continually directs the coming of the morning (Job 38:12), a fact Jesus affirmed when He said that God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45).

2. **Animals:** Scripture affirms that God feeds the wild animals of the field, for, “These all look to you, to give them their food in due season. When you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed” (Psalm 104:27-29; Job 38:39-41). Jesus also affirmed his when He said, “Look at the birds of the air. your heavenly Father feeds them” (Matt. 6:26). And He said that not one sparrow “will fall to the ground without your Father’s will” (Matthew 10:29).
 

“He [God] has determined the time of existence and the place of every nation on Earth.”
3. **Seemingly Random or Chance Events:** From a human perspective, the casting of lots (or its modern equivalent, the rolling of dice or flipping of a coin) is the most typical of random events that occur in the universe. But Scripture affirms that the outcome of such an event is from God: Proverbs 16:33, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”
4. **Events Fully Caused by God and Fully Caused by the Creature as Well:** For any



of these foregoing events (rain and snow, grass growing, sun and stars, the feeding of animals or casting of lots), we could give a completely satisfactory “natural” explanation. A botanist can detail the factors that cause the grass to grow, such as sun, moisture, temperature, nutrients in the soil, etc. Scripture says that God causes the grass to grow. A meteorologist can give a complete explanation of factors that cause rain (humidity, temperature, atmospheric pressure, etc.) and can even produce rain in a weather laboratory. Scripture says that God causes the rain. A physicist with accurate information on the force and direction a pair of dice was rolled could fully explain what caused the dice to give the result they did—yet Scripture says that God brings about the decision of the lot that is cast. This shows us that it is incorrect to reason that if we know the “natural” cause of something in this world, then God did not cause it. Rather, if it rains, we should thank Him. If crops grow, we should thank Him. In all of these events, it is not as though the event was partly caused by God and partly by factors in the created world. If that were the case, then we should always be looking for some small feature of an event that we could not explain and attribute to God. But surely this is not the correct position. Rather, these passages affirm that such events are entirely caused by God. Yet we know (in another sense) they are entirely caused by factors in creation as well. The doctrine of concurrence affirms that God directs, and works through, the distinctive properties of each created thing, so that these things themselves bring about the results that we see. In this way, it is possible to affirm in one sense events are fully (100 percent) caused by God and fully (100 percent) caused by the creature as well. However, divine and creaturely causes work in different ways. The divine cause of each event work an invisible, behind-the-scenes, directing cause and therefore could be called the primary cause that plans and initiates everything that happens. But the created thing brings about actions in ways consistent with the creature’s own properties, ways that often can be described by professional scientists who carefully observe the process or by us. These creaturely factors and properties can, therefore, be called the “secondary” causes of everything that happens, even though they are the causes that are evidence to us by observation.

5. **The Affairs of Nations:** Scripture also speaks of God’s providential control of human affairs. We read that God “makes nations great, and he destroys them: he enlarges nations and leads them away” (Job 12:23). “For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations” (Psalm 22:28). He has determined the time of existence and the place of every nation on Earth (Acts 17:26; 14:16).

*“And when Nebuchadnezzar repented, he learned to praise God, “this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules. Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.” All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months, he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, and the king answered and said, “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” While the words were still in the king’s mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, “O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.” Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles’ feathers, and his nails were like birds’ claws. At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”” (Daniel 4:24-35).*

6. **All Aspects of Our Lives:** It is amazing to see the extent to which Scripture affirms that God brings about various events in our lives. Our dependence on God to give us food each day is affirmed every time we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11), even though we work for our food. Paul looking at events with the eye of faith affirms that “my God will supply every need” of his children (Philippians 4:19), even though God may use “ordinary” means such as other people to do it. God plans our days before we are born. Psalm 139:16 extols, “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”

Job 14:5 reminds us, “Since his days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass,” This can be seen in the life of Paul, who says that God “had set me apart before I was born” (Galatians 1:15), and Jeremiah, to whom God said, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). All our actions are under God’s providential care, for “in Him we live and move” (Acts 17:28). The individual

“God causes all things to happen, but He does so in such a way that He upholds our ability to make willing, responsible choices...”

steps we take each day are directed by the Lord. Jeremiah confesses, “I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps.” (Jeremiah 10:23). We read that “a man’s steps are ordered by the Lord” (Proverbs

20:24), and that “a man’s mind plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps” (Proverbs 16:9). Proverbs 16:1 affirms, “The plans of the mind belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.” All of these passages and more, reporting both general statements about God’s work in the lives of all people, and specific examples of God’s work in the lives of individuals, lead us to conclude that God’s providential work of concurrence extends to all aspects of our lives. Our words, our steps, our movements, our hearts, and our abilities are from the Lord. This should not lead us to deny the reality of our choices and actions. Again and again, Scripture affirms that we do cause events to happen. We are significant, and we are responsible. We do have choices, and these are real choices that bring about real results. One approach to these passages about God’s concurrence is to say that if our choices are real, they cannot be caused by God. But the number of passages that affirm this providential control of God is so considerable, and the difficulties involved in giving them some other interpretation are so formidable, that it does not seem that this is the right approach to them. God causes all things to happen, but He does so in such a way that He upholds our ability to make willing, responsible choices, choices that have real and eternal results, and for which we are held accountable. Exactly how God combines his providential control with our willing and significant choices, Scripture does not explain to us. But rather than deny one aspect or another, we

should accept both in an attempt to be faithful to all the teaching of Scripture.

### Government

We have discussed the first two aspects of Providence: 1) preservation and 2) concurrence. This third aspect of God's providence indicates that God has a purpose in all that He does in the world and He providentially governs or directs all things so that they accomplish His purposes. Psalm 103:9 exclaims, "His kingdom rules over all." Moreover, "He does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What are you doing?'"

Paul affirms that "from him and through him and to him are all things" (Romans 11:36), and that "God has put all thing sin subjection under his feet" (1 Corinthians 15:27). God is the one who

"accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1:11), so that ultimately "...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11). It is because Paul knows that God is sovereign over all and works His purposes in every

"Failure to meditate on God's providence is sinful for it diminishes our praise of God."

event that happens that he can declare that "...we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

### The Puritans and the Providence of God

John Flavel often mediated on the Word of God and the providence of God. His familiarity with Scripture is outstanding. In many ways, *The Mystery of Providence* is a tapestry woven from biblical principles and history, with additional illustrations and practical illustrations. It reveals Flavel's vast knowledge of every page of Scripture.

Failure to meditate on God's providence is sinful for it diminishes our praise of God. Moreover, we rob ourselves of the nourishment our faith receives from such meditation. We slight the God who acts in Providence. Meditation on God's providence is essential if we are to come to God in prayer and know how to address Him. But how can we learn to meditate on God's providence? Flavel offered the following four directions:

1. Work hard at remembering and exploring the providence of God toward you. We should do this by extensively tracing God's ways through our life and counting the blessings He has poured out on us. We do this intensively also; Flavel advised, "Let not your thoughts swim like feathers upon the surface of the water, but sink like lead to the bottom." Each Christian's life is a marvelous story written by God for our reading and edification. John Norton (1606-1663 A.D.) said that if the least of God's saints, who had walked with God for only a few years, could write down all of Lord's

dealings with him, it “would make a volume full of temptations, signs, and wonders: a wonderful history, because a history of such experiences, each one whereof is more than a wonder.” Flavel also counseled readers to explore the timing of God’s actions and the care that timing expresses. Think about the means He has employed with you—a stranger or even an enemy rather than a friend, an evil act rather than a benevolent one. Consider the ways “all things” work together for believers (Romans 8:28); that “a thousand friendly hands are at work for them to promote and bring about their happiness.” In particular, we should trace the relationship between prayer and providence, to see how “providences have born the very signatures of your prayers upon them.”

2. Trace the connection between the providence of God in your life and the promises of God in His Word. Doing this will confirm the reliability of Scripture and teach us what course of action we should take in a given set of circumstances. The Christian’s rule of life is God’s revealed will (in Scripture), not His secret will (which comes to expression in Providence). As the latter unfolds, we discover that God is always faithful to His promises.
3. Look beyond the events and circumstances of providence to God as author and provider. Think of the attributes and ways of God (His love, wisdom, grace, condescension, purposes, methods and goodness). Recognize how He reveals these attributes and things in His dealings with you. Remember too that God often works out His purposes through painful trials. He is sovereign in all things, gracious, wise, faithful, all-sufficient, and unchanging, which is precisely what we need to remember in the darkness of affliction, “God is what He was, and where He was.”
4. Response to each providence in an appropriate way. Even in sorrow, biblically instructed believers will always experience an element of comfort and joy. For no element of God’s providence should be viewed as a mark of His enmity against us. God’s heart is full of love, whilst the face of Providence is full of frowns.” The Christian who realizes the Lord is near (Philippians 4:5) will see all these things in proper perspective.

But what we are to do when the providences of God seem to conflict with His promises? First, we must learn how to resist discouragement. God is teaching us patience. It may not yet be God’s time to act, or He may be delaying to increase our appetite for the blessing for which we long. What are we to do? We must remember that He is bringing about a greater blessing: our willingness to depend entirely on God and His good pleasure. Our loving Father delights to come to us when we are the end of our resources. Perhaps we are not yet ready to receive the blessing. If all

His mercies are of grace and we do not deserve them, we must learn to wait for them.

Second, we must learn not to assume that we fully understand God's way and purposes. "There are hard texts in the works, as well as in the word of God," Flavel said. "It becomes us modestly and humbly to reverence but not to dogmatize about them; a man may easily get a strain by over-reaching." In Psalm 73, Asaph depended on his depression by trying to understand all the intricacies of God's ways; the same can be true for us. Trying to solve mysteries that are too great for us will only breed suspicion of God, darkness of spirit, and tempt us to take matters into our own hands. That leads us to trust in providence and to reject the wisdom and love of God.

Mediating the right way on God's providence leads to ongoing communion with God, since He "manifests himself among his people by providences as well as ordinances." A chief pleasure of the Christian life is to trace the harmony of God's attributes as He expresses them in His providences.

Such meditation also serves to "over-power and suppress the natural atheism that is in your hearts." As a wise and compassionate pastor, Flavel knew that some true believers were afflicted with doubts about God's goodness and even His very existence. Meditations on the providence of God can prop up our faith as we trace the clear lines of God's loving care and mighty power in our lives.

In this way, faith is supported by what we have seen of God in the past. The young David drew strength for his conflict with Goliath from his memories of the providence of God in the past (1 Sam. 17:37). A spirit of praise then breathes sweet melody into our lives, and Christ becomes more important to us since all of God's mercies come to us only in and through Him. With melted hearts, inward poise, and an increased devotion to holiness, we are thus equipped to face death, which Flavel knew is often a time of considerable inner turmoil and special temptation from Satan. Dying is one of the two most difficult acts of faith (the other is coming to Christ for the first time). But the dying believer who is able to rehearse the blessings of God's providence in his or her life will surely know God's peace.

Flavel closes with this basic and practical advice: learn to record in writing the providences of God in your life, "For by doing so you will preserve the memory of them for future meditation and encouragement. Flavel said, "Providences carries our lies, liberties, and concernments in its hand every moment. Your bread is in its cupboard, your money in its purse, your safety in its enfolding arms: and sure it is the least part of what you owe, to record the favors you receive at its hands."

### **How the Providence of God Relates to the Christian Life**

Do not be afraid but trust in God. Jesus emphasizes the fact that our sovereign Lord watches over us and cares for us as His children. Matthew 6:26 says, "Look at the



birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" If God feeds the birds and clothes the grass of the field, He will take care of us. Matthew 10:29-31 states, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

David was able to sleep in the midst of his enemies because he knew that God's providential control made him "dwell in safety," and he could say, "In peace I will both lie down and sleep" (Psalm 4:8). Many of the Psalms encourage us to trust God and not to fear because the Lord keeps and protects His people. Psalm 91 says, "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High..." Also, Psalm 121 states, "I lift up my eyes to the hills." Because of our confidence in God's providential care, we need not fear any evil or harm, even if it does come to us—it can only come by God's will and ultimately for our good. Thus Peter says that "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is

tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6-7). In all of this we need not worry about the future but trust in God's omnipotent care.

"It is important to remember that God is the creator and judge of the world, moving it toward an ultimate goal that we cannot fully grasp."

Be Thankful for All Good Things That Happen If we genuinely believe all that all good things are caused by God, then our hearts will indeed be

full when we say, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits" (Psalm 103:2). We will thank Him for our daily food; indeed we will "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Our faith should be strengthened as we consider God's providence—how our loving father carefully governs our lives. As you study providence, there are five principles that you should keep in mind. The following five points are from *Amazing Grace* by Dr. Timothy George and originally shared at Crossway's blog:

1. ***The doctrine of providence reminds us that God is the sovereign Lord of history.*** It is important to remember that God is the creator and judge of the world, moving it toward an ultimate goal that we cannot fully grasp. For this reason, we must remember not to align our faith with any particular political movement or institution.

2. ***We often see the pattern of providence only in retrospect.*** We are often so overcome by grief or anger about our circumstances that we struggle to see how these experiences fit into God's plan for us. Remember the story of Joseph? Surely Joseph wondered about the goodness of a God who allowed all of those things to happen to him. And yet through those trials, God raised up Joseph and saved the entire nation of Israel.
3. ***God uses suffering and tragedy as occasions to display His glory.*** It is easy to doubt God's love during times of tragedy. But behind the suffering, we are able to experience the love of a wise father who has promised never to leave or forsake us.
4. ***God's grace is sufficient when the answer is no.*** When we are denied requests or experience afflictions, like Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, we come to know more deeply the sufficiency of God's grace.
5. ***The cross is the place where grace and providence embrace.*** No other place can confirm the truth of Romans 8:28 like the cross of Jesus. Tortured and abandoned, Jesus experienced the ultimate betrayal and sacrifice. We look back on the event as a triumph, for God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ that day. We can be sure that He will also take the broken pieces of our lives and piece them together into a beautiful, whole mosaic.

### Conclusion

The Puritans writings on Providence are easy to read, yet they are deeply thought provoking. They are biblically focused; they throb with a sense of God's ongoing activity. They are rigorously Reformed, yet they are wonderfully sensitive to human pain. They were written for people living in a time of social, political, and religious upheaval in the seventeenth century. They were written for people who knew a great deal of angsts that we moderns often mistakenly view as peculiarly modern or even postmodern. The Puritan writings also apply to people in the twenty-first century who suffer massive change. More than that, they spell out clearly some biblical principles that Christians today desperately need to hear.

"The Puritan writings also apply to people in the twenty-first century who suffer massive change."

- God is in control of His universe.
- God is working out His perfect purposes, also in my life.
- God is not my servant.
- God's ways are far more mysterious and wonderful than I can understand.

- God is always good; I can always trust Him.
- God's timetable is not the same as mine.
- God is far more interested in what I become than in what I do.
- Freedom from suffering is not promised in the Christian gospel.
- Suffering is an integral part of the Christian life.
- God works through suffering to fulfill His purposes in me.
- God's own purposes, not mine, are what brings Him glory.
- God enables me to read His providences through the lens of His Word.
- I have few greater pleasures than tracing the wonders of God's ways.

Little wonder, then, that Sedgwick admonishes us with the words of Psalm 37:5, "Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass." The God of the Bible, the God of sovereign providence, He alone is worthy of such trust.

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- v. Flavel, *Mystery*, in *Works*, 4:428.
- vi. Flavel, *Mystery*, in *Works*, 4:435.)
- vii. Flavel, *Mystery*, in *Works*, 4:436.
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- ix. Flavel, *Mystery*, in *Works*, 4:496
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- xi. Timothy George, *Amazing Grace*, January 2011, accessed 21 November 2016. <https://www.crossway.org/blog/2011/01/five-principles-of-providence/>.
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## The Grace, Mercy, and Patience of God

By Wayne Grudem



**God's mercy, patience, and grace may be seen as three separate attributes,** or as specific attributes of God's goodness. The definitions given here show these attributes as special examples of God's goodness when it is used for the benefit of specific classes of people. God's mercy means God's goodness towards those in misery and distress. God's grace means God's goodness towards those who deserve only punishment. God's patience means God's goodness in withholding of punishment toward those who sin over a period of time.

These three characteristics of God's nature are often mentioned together, especially in the Old Testament. When God declared His name to Moses, he proclaimed in Exodus 34:6, "The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,"" David says in Psalms 103:8, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Because these characteristics of God are often mentioned together, it may seem difficult to distinguish among them. Yet the characteristic of mercy is often

emphasized where people are in misery or distress. David says in 2 Samuel 24:14, "I am in great distress; let us fall into the hand of the Lord for his mercy is great." The two blind men who wish Jesus to see their plight and heal them cry, "Have mercy on us, Son of David" (Matthew. 9:27). When Paul speaks of the fact that God comforts us in affliction he calls God the "Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3). In time of need, we need to draw near to God's throne so that we might receive both mercy and grace (Hebrews 4:16; 2:17; James 5:11). We are to imitate God's mercy in our conduct toward others. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

With respect to the attribute of grace we find that Scripture emphasizes that God's grace, or his favor, toward those who deserve no favor but only punishment, is never obligated but is always freely given on God's part. God says, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and

will show mercy on those I will show mercy" (Exodus 33:19; quoted in Romans 9:15). Yet God is regularly gracious toward his people: "Turn to me and be gracious to me, After Thy Manner with those who love Thy name" (Psalms 119:132 NASB). In fact, Peter can call God "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10).

Grace as God's goodness especially shown to those who do not deserve it is seen frequently in Paul's writings. He emphasizes that salvation by grace is the opposite of salvation by human effort, for grace is a freely given gift. Romans 3:23-24, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." The distinction between grace and a salvation earned by works that merit a reward is also seen in Romans 11:6, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace." Grace, is God's favor freely given to those who do not deserve His favor.

Paul also sees that if grace is unmerited, then there is only one human attitude appropriate as an instrument for receiving such grace, namely, faith: Romans 4:16, "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all." Faith is the one human attitude that is the opposite of depending on oneself, for it involves trust in or dependence upon another. Thus, it is devoid of self-reliance or attempts to gain righteousness by human effort. If God's favor is to come to us apart from our own merit then it must come when we depend not on our own merit but on the merits of another, and that is precisely when we have faith.

"Paul also sees that if grace is unmerited , then there is only one human attitude appropriate as an instrument for receiving such grace, namely, faith..."

In the New Testament, and especially in Paul's epistles, not only the forgiveness of sins, but also the entire living of the Christian life can be seen to result from God's continuous bestowal of grace. Therefore, Paul can say, "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10). Luke speaks of Antioch as the place where Paul and Barnabas "had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled" (Acts 14:26), indicating that the church there, in sending out Paul and Barnabas, saw the success of their ministry in the church there, as dependent upon God's continuing grace. Furthermore, the blessing of "grace" upon Paul's readers is the most frequent apostolic blessing in his letters (Romans 1:7; 16:20; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 16:23; 2 Corinthians 1:2; 13:14; Galatians 1:3; 6:18).

God's patience, similarly, was mentioned in some of the verses cited above in connection with God's mercy. The Old Testament frequently speaks of God as "slow to anger" (Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Psalms 86:1; 103:8; 145:8; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3, et al.). In the New Testament, Paul speaks about God's kindness and forbearance and patience" (Romans 2:4), and says that Jesus Christ displays His "perfect patience" toward Paul himself as an example for others (1 Timothy 1:16; Romans 9:22; 1 Peter 3:20).

**We are also to imitate God's patience and be "slow to anger" (James 1:19),** and be patient in suffering as Christ was (1 Peter 2:20). We are to lead a life "with patience" (Ephesians 4:2), and "patience" is listed among the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22). As with most of the attributes of God that we are to imitate in our lives, patience requires a moment-by-moment trust in God to fulfill his promises and purposes in our lives at His chosen time. Our confidence that the Lord will soon fulfill His purposes for our good and His glory will enable us to be patient. James makes this connection when he says in James 5:8, "You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord, is at hand."

Adapted from Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Academic, 1994), 200-201.



## God's Self-Sufficiency: Embracing the Reality that God Doesn't Need You

By Brian Cosby



**In 2009, my wife and I purchased a home in Atlanta, Georgia.** Despite being a larger house in a nice neighborhood, it was what our realtor called “a handy man special”. It needed some *serious* TLC. The fact that dogs had used the walls to “mark” their territory and cigarette smoke seemed to hang around like an unwanted guest, made my wife initially re-

fuse the deal. But, I assured her of my (never-before-seen) carpentry skills and off we went—paint brush and all!

Trips to the local Home Depot soon began to drain my bank account. The items that needed repairing were like God's mercies; they were new every morning. But Home Depot's radio advertisement gave me the confidence I needed to get the job done: “You can do it; we can help.” It's a bad day, however, when the church begins to take its theology from a home improvement store. Instead of an unashamed affirmation of the Christian life being by grace alone, *through faith alone*, and in Christ alone, we have adopted a synergistic approach: *you can do it; God can help*.

### God's Self-Sufficiency

The reality is that God doesn't *need* us. God didn't create the world, the oceans, the tigers, or people because he was desperately lonely or lacking. He didn't create us to make up for a deficiency in His character or attributes. Rather, God is self-existent and

self-sufficient. Theologians call this attribute of God His *aseity*. The living and true God lacks no good thing. He isn't advanced or improved by our existence or efforts. Moreover, God is not dependent upon his creation; rather he is independent from his creation. Michael Horton writes, "The world is not necessary for God's being or happiness."<sup>[1]</sup>

When the Apostle Paul addressed the Areopagus in Athens, he said, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, *as though he needed anything*, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:24-25, emphasis added). We would do well to consider a theology and worship and ministry that sees God as self-sufficient, self-existent, and complete in all respects.

### God's Self-Sufficiency Seen in His Glory

Everything exists for the glory of God. He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things. "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Paul writes, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever" (Rom. 11:36). Peter concurs, "in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 4:11).

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) argued that the end (ultimate purpose) for which God created the world was for the praise of His glory. Thus, our chief end and God's chief end are one and the same: to glorify God and to enjoy him forever (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. 1). But a quick glance at the American Christian scene reveals something completely foreign to this. Many worship services seem to be more interested in entertainment than truth and more geared toward gimmicks than God. Much of the ministry and even counseling today seems to be more influenced by Dr. Phil than Jesus.

Even Christian music isn't off the hook in regards to this theological pit-fall. The popular Christian song "Above All" references Christ's death on the cross and states, "You took the fall and thought of me above all." Jesus thought about *me* above *all*? **News flash: Jesus didn't save you because he has good taste; he saved you for the praise of his glory.**

### God's Self-Sufficiency Seen in Worship

We can also see the impact of God's self-sufficiency in worship. When we gather in worship each Lord's Day, we don't come bringing God something that He doesn't already have. We are not making up for His perceived neediness. Rather, we come in worship as those like sheep—needy, hungry, dependent, and oftentimes wayward.

Worship reveals *our* greatest need, not the Shepherd's. Worship is a reflection of God's own greatness, with faith-filled reverence and joy, in the knowledge of His truth. God is complete in himself. When we worship Him, we are not adding to His greatness, but rather expressing our satisfaction in Him and His greatness.

God didn't *become* loving only when He created Adam and Eve. His love has existed eternally between the persons of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Moreover, God didn't *become* gracious only after the Fall in Genesis 3. Rather, according to 2 Timothy 1:9, God “saved us and called us to a holy calling... because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus *before the ages began*” (emphasis mine).

Our entry into God's creation didn't add to His attributes, but became an occasion, a platform, for the display and expression of His attributes. John Piper writes, “The love of God for sinners is not making much of them, but his graciously freeing and empowering them to enjoy making much of him.”<sup>[2]</sup>

**International Mission Board president, David Platt, has noted that if every local church and ministry organization and denomination were to fall down and blow away, *God would still make a great name for himself*.** We are called into God's mission on earth, not because He needs us, but because He loves us. May we recover a God-centered theology that sees Him as complete in Himself and self-sufficient and worship Him as receivers of His sovereign grace.

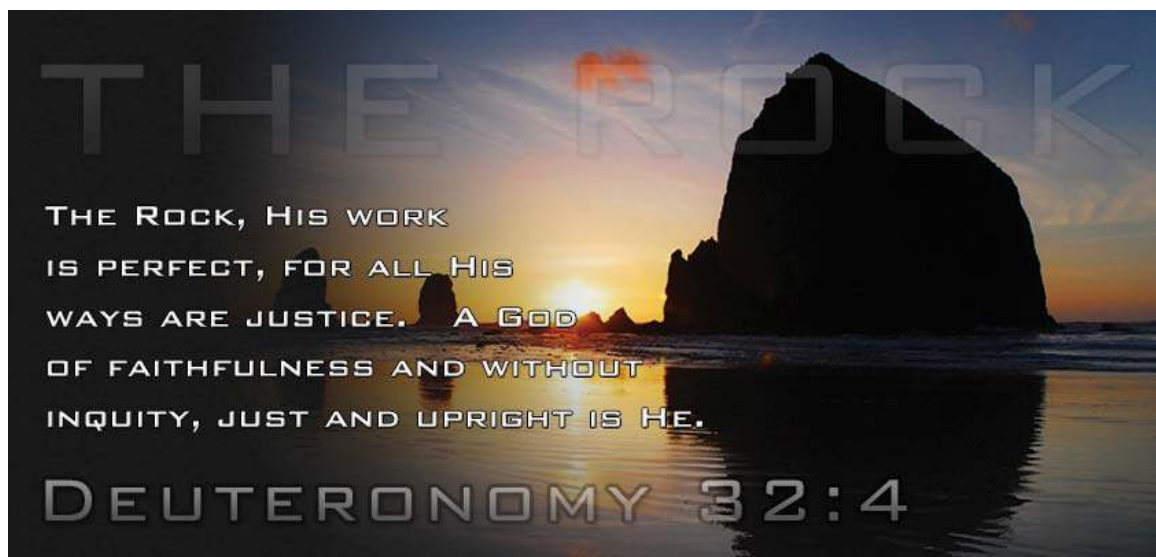
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<sup>[1]</sup> Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 76.

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## The Righteousness of God

By Dave Jenkins



**In English, the terms *righteousness* and *justice* are different words,** but in both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament there is only one-word group behind these two English terms. In the Old Testament, the terms primarily translate forms of the *tsedek* word group, and in the New Testament members of the *dikaois* word group. Therefore, these two terms will be considered together, speaking of one attribute of God.

**God's righteousness means that God always acts in accordance with what is right and is, Himself, the final standard of what is right.** Speaking of God, Moses says, in Deuteronomy 32:4, "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he." Abraham successfully appeals to God's own character of righteousness when he says in Genesis 18:25, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" God also speaks and commands what is right in Psalm 19:8, "The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart." And God says of Himself in Isaiah 45:19, "I the Lord speak the truth, I declare what is right." As a result of God's righteousness, it is necessary that He treat people according to what they deserve. Thus, it is necessary that God punishes sin, for it does not deserve reward; it is wrong and deserves punishment.

When God does not punish sin, it seems suggest that He is unrighteous, unless some other means of punishing sin can be seen. “Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:25-26). When Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins, it showed that God was truly righteous, because He did give appropriate punishment to sin, even though He did forgive His people their sins.

With respect to the definition of righteousness given above we may ask, “What is right?” In other words, what ought to happen and what ought to be? Here we must respond that whatever conforms to God’s moral character is right. But, why is such a thing true? It is right because it conforms to His moral character! If indeed God is the final standard of righteousness, then there can be no standard outside of God by which we measure righteousness or justice. He is the final standard. Whenever Scripture confronts the question for whether God Himself is righteous or not, the ultimate answer is always that we, as God’s creatures, have no right to say that God is unrighteous or unjust. The creature cannot say that of the Creator. Paul responds to a very difficult question about God’s righteousness by saying in Romans 9:20-21, “But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?”

In answer to Job’s questioning about whether God has been righteous in His dealings with him, God answers in Job 40:2 and 8, “Shall a fault-finder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it...Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?” Then God answers not in terms of an explanation that

would allow Job to understand why God’s actions were right, but rather in terms of a statement of God’s own majesty and power! God does not need to explain the rightness of His actions to Job, for God is the Creator and Job is the creature. Job 40:9 states, “Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?” Likewise, God questions Job in chapter 38, verse 12, ““Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place,” and continues in 38:34-45, ““Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are’? Who has put wisdom in the inward parts or given understanding to the mind? Who can number the clouds by wis-

“God does not need to explain the rightness of his actions to Job, for God is the Creator and Job is the creature.”

dom? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens, when the dust runs into a mass and the clods stick fast together? Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their dens or lie in wait in their thicket? Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God for help, and wander about for lack of food?” Finally God asks Job (39:19; 39:26; 40:4), “Do you give the horse his might? Do you clothe his neck with a mane? Is it by your understanding that the hawk soars and spreads his wings toward the south? Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth.”

Nevertheless, it should be a cause for thanksgiving and gratitude when we realize that righteousness and omnipotence are both possessed by God. If He were a God of perfect righteousness without power to carry out that righteousness, He would not be worthy of worship and we would have no guarantee that justice will ultimately prevail in the universe. But, if He were a God of unlimited power, yet without righteousness in His character, how unthinkably horrible the universe would be. There would be unrighteousness at the center of all existence, and there would be nothing anyone could do to change it. Existence would become meaningless, and we would be driven to the most utter despair. We ought, therefore, to continually thank and praise God for who He is, “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he” (Deuteronomy 32:4).

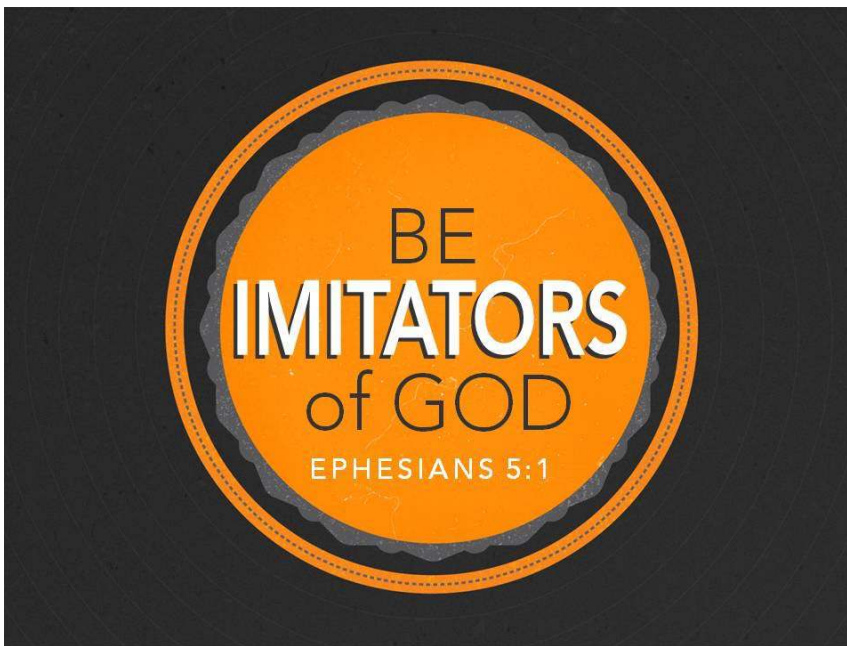
Righteousness is revealed in His law, God’s holiness, righteousness, and justice are never abstract ideas but are exercised in concrete relationships with covenant creatures. God’s moral commands are never arbitrary, but reflect the proper relationships that His eternal character demands of human beings—in relation both to Him and to each other.

**God can no more relax His holy justice than He can suspend His love, omniscience,** or any other attribute in the cosmic courtroom; God must be true to Himself by punishing sin. Here, as in the other attributes Christ—especially at the cross—most fully displays the holy love and the holy justice of God.



## What are the Communicable Attributes of God?

By Dave Jenkins



**Theologians often like to use fancy words to describe biblical teaching and categories.**

In two articles in this issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, I'm going to explain what the *communicable* and *incommunicable* attributes of God are. In this article, we'll start with the *communicable* attributes of God. Dr. John Frame helpfully explains these terms for us when he notes:

*"Theologians have chosen different approaches*

*to describing the attributes of God. The most common in Presbyterian circles has been the distinction between communicable and incommunicable attributes. The former are attributes that God and man can share in common, the latter attributes that they do not share. But in on sense there are no communicable attribute. Human love at its best is analogues to divine love, but it is not the same thing, for God's love is original and ours is derivative from his. On the other hand, no attribute of God are entirely incommunicable, for we are his image in a comprehensive sense. Our love, at its best, is the love of God imaged in our own lives. So in presenting the attributes of god, Scripture does not emphasize the contrast between communicable and incommunicable."*[\[i\]](#)

The attributes of God are important to study. They help us sort out what kind of God the God of the Bible is. Our God is independent, immutable, mortal, and eternal.

This cannot be said of any creature. That is why most of the attributes of God carry the negative prefix and is why we call them incommunicable attributes—attributes that cannot be shared with us. However, because human beings are created in God's image, they do share other attributes with God. Where we have attributes similar to God's, He is always qualitatively different and greater. Therefore, these communicable attributes will often have the "*omni*" (all) prefix attached to them. The communicable attributes of God are wisdom, knowledge, power, holiness, righteousness, justice, jealousy, wrath, goodness, love, and mercy. God's communicable attributes are those attributes that we have to possess and manifest.

The Scriptures teach that God is holy. The term holy, as it is used in the Bible to describe God, refers to both His nature and His character. Primarily, God's holiness refers to His greatness and His transcendence, and to the fact that He is above and beyond anything in the universe. In that regards, the holiness of God is incommunicable. He alone in His being transcends all created beings. Secondly, the word holy, as it is applied to God refers to His purity, His absolute moral, and ethical excellence. This is what God has in mind when He commands holiness from His creatures: "Be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44; 1 Peter 1:16).

When we are grafted into Christ, we are renewed inwardly by the Holy Spirit. The third person of the Trinity is called "holy" in part because His primary task in the Trinitarian work of redemption is to apply the work of Christ to us. He is the One who regenerates us and the One who works for our sanctification. The Holy Spirit works in us and through us to bring us into conformity with the image of Christ, that we might fulfill the mandate for holiness that God has imposed upon us.

In our fallen state, we are anything but holy; nevertheless, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit we are being made holy, and we look toward our glorification, when we will be completely sanctified, purified of all sin. In that sense, we are imitators of God. Even in our glorified state, however, we will still be creatures; we will not be divine beings.

### **Love**

When Paul speaks of our responsibility to be imitators of God, he mentions that we are called to manifest love (Ephesians 5:2). The Scriptures tell us that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). The love of God is descriptive of His character; it is one of His moral attributes, and therefore it is a quality that does not belong to God alone but is communicated to His creatures. God is love, and love is of God, and all who love in the sense of the *agape* of which the Scriptures speak are born of God. God's love is an attributes that can be imitated, and we are called to do just that.

### **Goodness**

The goodness of God is another moral attribute that we are called to emulate, though the Scriptures give a grim description of our ability in this regard. Mark 10:17-18 says, "And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." Jesus was not denying His deity here, but simply asserting the ultimate goodness of God. Elsewhere, the Apostle Paul, quoting the psalmist, says, "None is righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10). In our fallen condition, we do not imitate or reflect this aspect of God's character.

Yet believers are called to a life of good works, so with the help of the Holy Spirit we can grow in goodness and reflect this aspect of God's nature.

### Justice and Righteousness

There are other communicable attributes of God that we are to imitate. One is justice. When justice is spoken of in biblical categories, it is never as an abstract concept that exists above and beyond God, and to which God Himself is bound to conform. Rather, in the Scriptures, the concept of justice is linked with the idea of righteousness, and it is based on the internal character of God. The fact that God is just means that He always acts according to His righteousness.

Theologians make a distinction between the internal righteousness or the justice of God and the external righteousness or justice of God. When God acts, He always does what is right. In other words, He always does that which is in conformity with justness. In the Bible, justice is distinguished from mercy and grace. If we were to be treated by God according to His justice, we would all perish. That is why, when we stand before God, we plead that He would treat us, according to His mercy and grace.

"People get confused, however, when considering this alongside of God's mercy and grace, because grace is not justice."

Justice defines God's righteousness; He never punishes people more severely than the crimes they have committed deserve, and He never fails to reward those to whom a reward is due. He always operates justly; never does God do anything that is unjust.

There are two universal categories: justice and injustice. Everything outside the circle of justice is in the category of injustice, but there are different kinds of injustice. The mercy of God is outside the circle of justice and is a kind of injustice. Injustice is evil; an act of injustice violates the principles of righteousness. If God were to do something unfair, He would be acting unjustly. Abraham knew the impossibility of that when he said to God in Genesis 18:25, "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" Because God is a just judge, all His judgments are according to righteousness, so that He never acts in an unjust way; He never commits an injustice.

People get confused, however, when considering this alongside of God's mercy and grace, because grace is not justice. Grace and mercy are outside the category of justice, but they are not inside the category of injustice. There is nothing wrong with God's being merciful; there is nothing evil in His being gracious. In fact, in one sense, we have to extend this. Even though justice and mercy are not the same thing, justice is linked to righteousness, and righteousness may at times include mercy and grace. The reason we need to distinguish between them is that justice is necessary to righteousness, but mercy and grace are actions God takes freely. God is never required to be merciful or gracious. The moment we think that God owes us grace or mercy, we are no longer thinking about grace or mercy. Our mind tend to trip there so that we confuse mercy and grace with justice. Justice may be owed, but mercy and grace are

always voluntary.

In terms of God's external righteousness or justice, and His internal righteousness or justice, God always does what is right. His actions, His external behavior, always correspond to His internal character. Jesus put it simply when He told His disciples that a corrupt tree cannot produce good fruit; corrupt fruit comes from a corrupt tree, and good fruit comes from a good tree (Matthew 7:17-18). **God always acts according to His character, and His character is always righteous.** Therefore, everything He does is righteous. There is a distinction between His internal righteousness and His external righteousness between who He is and that He does, though they are connected.

The same is true of us. We are not sinners because we win; we sin because we are sinners. There is something flawed about our inner character. When the Holy Spirit changes us inwardly that change is evidenced in an outward change of behavior. We are called to conform outwardly to the righteousness of God because we have been made as creatures in the image of God who have the capacity for righteousness. We have been made with the capacity to do what is right and to act in a just fashion. Micah 6:8 states, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness,<sup>[a]</sup> and to walk humbly with your God?" God's justice and righteousness are communicable attributes that we are called to emulate.

### Wisdom

God is seen as not only wise, but all-wise, and we are told to act according to wisdom. The body of the Old Testament literature that falls between the Historical Books and the Prophets is called the Wisdom Literature—which includes Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

Proverbs 9:10 tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. For the Jew, the very essence of biblical wisdom was found in godly living, not in clever knowledge. In fact, the Old Testament makes a distinction between knowledge and wisdom. We are told to get knowledge, but above all we are told to get wisdom. The purpose of gaining knowledge is to become wise in the sense of knowing how to live in a way that is pleasing to God. God Himself never makes foolish decisions or behaves in a foolish manner. There is no foolishness in His character or activity. We, on the other hand, are filled with foolishness. Yet wisdom is a communicable attribute, and **God Himself is the fountainhead and source of all wisdom.** If we lack wisdom, we are called to pray God that in His wisdom, He would illuminate our thinking (James 1:5). He gives us His Word that we might be wise.

#### Reference:

[1] John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 2013), 232.

## What are the Incommunicable Attributes of God?

**By Dave Jenkins**

**In the study of the doctrine of God, a primary concern is to develop an understanding of His attributes.** In this article, we'll look at specific characteristics of God, such as His Holiness, His immutability, and His infiniteness, to gain a coherent understanding of who He is.

At the outset, we must make a distinction between God's *communicable* attributes and His *in-*

*communicable* ones. A communicable attribute is one that can be transferred from one person to another. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta studies contagious diseases. Such diseases are also known as “communicable diseases”. Such diseases are known as communicable diseases because they are easily transmitted from one person to another. In like manner, God’s communicable attributes are those that can be transferred to His creatures.

By contrast, an incommunicable attribute is one that *cannot be transferred*. God's incommunicable attributes therefore, cannot be attributes of human beings. Even God cannot communicate certain characteristics of His being to the creatures He has made. Sometimes theologians are asked whether it is possible for God to create another god, and the answer is no. If God were to create another god, the result would be a creature, which, by definition, would lack the necessary attributes that describe God, such as independence, eternality, and immutability.

As we examine the distinction between God's communicable and incommunicable attributes, it is important to note that God is a simple being; in other words, He is not





made up of parts. We have distinctive body parts—toes, intestines, lungs, and so forth. God is a simple being in the sense that He is not complex. Theologically speaking, God is His attributes.

God's simplicity also means that His attributes define one another. We say, for example, that God is holy, just, immutable, and omnipotent, but His omnipotence is always a holy omnipotence, a just omnipotence, and an immutable omnipotence. All the character traits that we can identify in God also define His omnipotence. By the same token, God's eternality is an omnipotent eternality, and His holiness is an omnipotent holiness. He is not one part holiness, another part omnipotence, and another part immutability. He is altogether holy, altogether omnipotent, and altogether immutable.

The distinction between God's communicable and incommunicable attributes is important because it helps us to come to a clear understanding of the difference between God and any creature. No creature can ever possess an incommunicable attribute of almighty God.

### Aseity

The ultimate difference between God and other beings lies in the fact that creatures are derived, conditional, and dependent. However, God is not dependent. He has the power of being in and of Himself; He does not derive it from something else. This attribute is called God's Aseity, from the Latin *a sei*, meaning "from oneself."

Scripture tells us that in God "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), but nowhere are we told that God has His being in man. He has never needed us to survive or to be, and yet we cannot survive for an instant without the power of His being upholding our being. God created us, which means that from our first breath we are dependent upon Him for our very existence. What God creates, He also sustains and preserves, so we are as dependent upon God for our continuing existence as we were for our original existence. This is the supreme difference between God and us; God has no such dependence upon anything outside of Himself.

In an essay, John Stuart Mill rebutted the classical cosmological argument for the existence of God, which holds that every effect must have a cause, the ultimate cause being God Himself. Mill said that if everything has to have a cause, then God had to have a cause, so to carry the argument all the way through, we cannot stop with God, but have to ask who caused God. Bertrand Russell was convinced by the cosmological argument until he read Mill's essay. The argument Mill put forth was an epiphany for Russell, and he used it in his book *Why I Am Not a Christian*.

Mill was wrong, however. His insight was based on a false understanding of the law of causality. This law affirms that every effect must have a cause, not that everything that is must have a cause. The only thing that requires a cause is an effect, an effect requires a cause by definition because that is what an effect is—something caused by something else. But does God require a cause? He does not, because He has His being in and of Himself; He is eternal and self-existent.

The Aseity of God is what defines the supremacy of the Supreme Being. Human beings are fragile. If we go a few days without water or a few minutes without oxygen, we die. Likewise, human life is susceptible to all kinds of diseases that can destroy it. But God



cannot die. God is not dependent on anything for His being. He has the very power of being in and of Himself, which is what human beings lack. We wish we had the power to keep ourselves alive forever, but we do not. We are dependent beings. God and God alone has Aseity.

Reason compelling demands a being who possesses Aseity; without it, nothing could exist in this world. There never could have been a time when nothing existed, because if there ever was such a time, nothing could exist now. Those who teach that the universe came into being seventeen billion years think in terms of self-creation, which is nonsense, because nothing can create itself. The fact that there is something now means that there has always been being.

A blade of grass screams the Aseity of God. The Aseity is not in the grass itself. Aseity is an incommunicable attribute. God cannot impart His eternality to a creature, because anything that has a beginning in time is, by definition, not eternal. We can be given eternal life going forward, but we cannot get it retroactively. We are not eternal creatures.

Eternality, as such, is an incommunicable attribute. God's immutability is linked with His Aseity because God is eternally what He is and who He is. His being is incapable of mutation or change. We, as creatures, are mutable and finite. God could not create another infinite being because there can only be one infinite being.

### **Worthy of Praise**

God's incommunicable attributes point to the way in which God is different from us and the way in which He transcends us. His incommunicable attributes reveal why we owe Him glory, honor, and praise. We stand up and give accolades to people who excel for a moment and then are heard no more, and yet the One who has the very power of being in and of Himself eternally, upon whom every one of us is absolutely dependent and to whom we owe our everlasting gratitude for every breath of air that we take, does not receive the honor and glory from His creatures that He so richly deserves. The One who is supreme deserves the obedience and worship of those whom He has made.

## Defining Miracles Biblically

By David Dunham



**The way we approach the miraculous is important.** Many Christians do not realize that they have adopted an impersonal worldview that makes the miraculous an intrusion into the affairs of our life. They sound often more like David Hume than the Bible. Hume, for example, believed that miracles were a “violation of the laws of nature.” The way many Christians talk about the miraculous acts of God follows this same line of thought, but this perspective does not align with the Bible’s picture and presentation of the miraculous. Christians must define miracles Biblically or we will risk misrepresenting God’s relationship to the world.

## Definitions

What is a “miracle”? We use the term in a variety of ways. We use it sarcastically to indicate something utterly unbelievable (ex. “My kids cleaned their room without me asking, it’s a miracle!”). We also use the term to speak of something extraordinary. We may speak of a person whose cancer was “miraculously” healed, or say of a man who should have died in a car crash that he was “saved by a miracle”. We apply it to the amazing act of childbirth – the “miracle of childbirth”. And we use it too to describe the supernatural acts of Jesus in walking on water and raising the dead. These uses do not, of course, all describe the same thing. We must properly define our term if we’re going to safeguard ourselves from poor theology.

To define the term we must begin with what we know. We have outlined some of the uses of the term above, but why do we apply this term so broadly? In each instance above we may conclude that there is an element of the extraordinary. The event being described is not what we expect or what we can conceive. Even with the “miracle of childbirth” we note that something amazing is happening. We may be able to explain the process of conception and growth and development, but the very act of creating human life inside the womb is still astounding and, at some level, beyond comprehension. But if we want to safeguard our theology we need a more thorough definition and we need that definition to be grounded in the revealed Word of God. John Frame has helped me more than any other theologian in unpacking the true nature of the miraculous according to Scripture. I will borrow from him heavily in this article. But, as with all Biblical concepts, we must start with precisely what Scripture says.

In the Scriptures the term “miracle” (and its equivalents: *wonders* and *signs*) is applied generally speaking to describe events caused by God that are so extraordinary that we would usually consider them to be impossible. We could look to a number of different events in Scripture commonly called miracles: the flood, the birth of Isaac, the turning of Moses’ staff into a serpent, the parting of the Red Sea, the crumbling of the walls of Jericho, etc. But how do these events differ from “natural events”. After all the “miracle of birth” is quite different from the miracle of resurrection. One is a “natural” event the other is most assuredly not. So, more must be said of this definition in order to clarify it. Most theologians point to two key ideas to help clarify a definition of miracles. Frame writes:

*Theological definitions of miracles tend to focus on “nature” and/or “immediacy”: a miracle is supernatural as opposed to natural, and/or it is accomplished by the “immediate” power of God.*

These two ideas are key parts to most theological definition of miracles. These two ideas, however, are actually often part of the reason our definitions turn out to be unbiblical.

In order to faithfully represent what Scriptures says, then, about miracles, we will need to seek to understand the relationship of the miraculous to both nature and mediation. This will set the stage, then, for further clarification on a definition of miracles that fits with the Bible's picture and accurately represents God's relationship to the world.

### Miracles and Nature

"The mark of a miracle, in a word," wrote B.B. Warfield, "is not that it is contra-natural, but that it is extra-natural and more specifically that it is super-natural" (*The Question of Miracles*). The great Princeton theologian is exemplary of a whole model of thinking about the relationship between miracles and nature. Miracles, many Christians say, are intrusions into the world. This explanation, however, does not quite fit with the Biblical worldview. Miracles are not best defined as "extra-natural".

We must begin by clarifying what we mean by "nature". Frame states that there are at least four different ways of thinking about "natural law". In each case, considering miracles as a violation fails to do appropriate justice to the relationship between nature and miracle.

"So, sometimes God "suspends natural law" in a miraculous work, and sometimes He doesn't."

The first perspective says that natural law is the "ultimate principle that governs the world." In the Bible, however, the ultimate principle governing the world is the decree of God. Hebrews 1:3 states that Christ upholds the universe by the power of His word. In this sense, then, to consider miracles as an exception to "natural law" is simply false. Miracles, like natural law in this definition, are nothing less than the decrees of God.

The second perspective states that natural law is the "regular process by which God usually governs creation." We note here that God has patterns of regularity by which He governs the world. So he says to Noah that he will keep the seasons regular (Gen. 8:22), and he has kept His word. Yet, we should not be too quick to observe miracles as a contrast with this perspective of natural law. After all, God sometimes uses very natural things to accomplish amazing miracles. Exodus 14:21 states that God used a "strong east wind" to dry up the land of the Red Sea to make way for the Israelites to cross. So, sometimes God "suspends natural law" in a miraculous work, and sometimes He doesn't. Therefore this idea should not be part of our definition of a miracle. We continue to need further clarification then on the relationship between the natural and miraculous.

The third perspective calls natural law the "human expectation concerning the works of nature." The trouble with this perspective is fairly obvious. It reduces

“natural law” to something essentially subjective. After all “expectations” vary from person to person, generation to generation, age to age. The expectations of those in the ancient world were far less “sophisticated” and scientific than those of modernists. All individuals differ and their expectations cannot be simply reduced to a single expectation. This offers us, then, no better distinction between miracle and nature.

“The failure of it, however, is that it doesn’t quite hold up in light of Scripture.”

Fourthly, Frame says that some use natural law to mean “the basic created structure of the universe.” This view, however, tends to suggest that natural laws are a kind of mechanistic structure that operates within the universe apart from God’s hands-on governance. In this view, then, miracles occur when God suspends these laws. Such a view, however, is definitely at odds with the Biblical view of nature. The Bible ascribes to God all the events of nature. He brings rain and sun, storm and locust. He governs the changing of seasons and the placement of seas. Furthermore, as we saw with Exodus 14:21, sometimes God uses the nature to accomplish what we would clearly qualify as a “miracle”—the parting of the Red Sea. So again the distinction that Christians try to make between nature and miracle in this way simply doesn’t work.

While there is no doubt that miracles are extraordinary acts, trying to clarify that definition requires care. Some definitions do harm to the Bible’s presentation of God’s relationship to the world. Miracles are not an intrusion into “nature”.

### Miracles and Immediacy

The second tool of refinement which theologians often use to define our term is the category of “immediacy”. Immediacy also, however, fails to clarify the term in accordance with Scripture. What do we mean by “immediacy”? Some theologians describe a miracle as an act that God does directly, immediately, by his own power. So J. Gresham Machen distinguished miracles from general providence by stating:

*In the case of other events, God uses means...whereas in the case of a miracle He puts forth His creative power just as truly as in that mighty act of creation which underlies the whole process of the world. (“Is the Bible Right About Jesus?”)*

In his view, a miracle is “an event in the external world that is wrought by the immediate power of God” (*What is Christianity? and Other Addresses*, 55). This is a helpful distinction in theory. The failure of it, however, is that it doesn’t quite hold up in light of Scripture.

The Scriptures do not make this distinction themselves, and as we do theology we ought to be careful that our clarifications do not go beyond what Scripture states.

B.B. Warfield noted the absences of Scriptural witness to this distinction, but insisted that in light of the “unusual” nature of miracles they can only logically be attributed to the immediate act of God. Exodus 14:21 tells us, in contrast to these Princeton theologians, that God parted the sea by using the mediation of a “strong east wind”. In John 9 Jesus heals the blind man with the application of mud mixed with spit, a gross mediation, but a miracle by mediation nonetheless. Scripture, then, does not deny miracles by means of mediation.

Louis Berkhof tried to further clarify this distinction by saying that miracles may be mediated, but the mediation is not natural. So mud and spit do not usually bring about the return of sight. If doctors are spitting on blind patients we generally think that

“Sometimes He uses secondary causes to accomplish His will and sometimes He doesn’t...”

poor practice. So mediation may happen, but it is not mediation “of second causes in their ordinary operation” (*Systematic Theology*, 176). The point remains, however, that God does still perform miraculous deeds by means of mediation. Mediation, therefore, is not a clarifying category for our definition. A proper definition of miracles needs to be more precise, and certainly needs to be grounded better in Scripture.

In the big picture it seems that as we approach a definition of “miracles” we generally have trouble understanding the ways in which God relates to the world. Our definitions can either affirm an active, involved, and sovereign God, or they can undermine Him. The Scriptures don’t paint a picture of the world as following a natural process isolated from divine providence, and miracles as those moments when God suddenly and dramatically shows up in the world. God is always already there and already involved. Sometimes He uses secondary causes to accomplish His will and sometimes he doesn’t, but that in and of itself does not define a miracle.

### **Miracles and Covenant Lordship**

How should we think of miracles? That is the significant question at hand, and while many theologians seek to answer that question by looking to the clarifying tools of “nature” and “immediacy” these tools do not seem to help us build a Biblical definition. An alternate approach, then, needs to be developed and John Frame has something to offer in that regard. Miracles are extraordinary manifestations of God’s Covenant Lordship.

Frame is most well-known as a theologian for his development of the concept of Covenant Lordship. He unpacks this idea beautifully in his book *The Doctrine of God*. There he argues that the three common features of God’s Covenant Lordship are control, authority, and presence. In each miraculous act we see some aspect of God’s covenant lordship manifested. So Frame writes:



*As mighty acts, miracles display the great power of the Lord to control His creation. As signs, they authoritatively reveal him. As wonders, they created in the hearts of people a religious awe, as they bring people into the presence of the living God. (258)*

The various words used in the Scriptures for the term “miracle” are easily seen to represent these three aspects of God’s covenant lordship. So the term translated as “power” or “mighty act” communicates God’s control. The term translated “sign” communicates his authority, and the term translated “wonder” communicates his presence. There is, then, perhaps some better Scriptural support for Frame’s definition.

In Luke 6:19 we read that “the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.” His miracles testify to his power. The woman who touched Jesus’ garment was instantly healed of a sickness she had suffered from for years. When she touched the hem of his robe Jesus felt that “power had gone out from him” (Mark 5:30). Even in the Old Testament we see that God leads the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt by His “right hand” which was “majestic in power” (Ex 15:6). Miracles manifest God’s power. Signs are revelations of God’s authority. Frame states it this way:

*Miracles not only accomplish great things, but they also display God to us. They teach us about him. So God feeds his people in the wilderness “to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Deut. 8:3). (259)*

“Often God’s mighty acts prompt the psalmists to compose their praises.”

Jesus regularly reveals his authority by means of the miraculous signs. He heals the paralytic in order to reveal that he has authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:1-11). He turns water into wine in order to reveal his glory (John 2:11). John tells us that Jesus did many miracles to persuade us that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:30-31). His miracles reveal His identity, they tell us of his authority.

Finally, we can see that his miracles manifest his presence. The miracles in Scripture often draw a response of awe (though sometimes they draw a response of a hard-heart too). It’s the kind of awe given by those who encounter the presence of the living God. So we see in Luke 5:1-10 that upon the miraculous catch of fish Peter says to Jesus, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man” (v. 8). His response is right because he suddenly sees before whom he is standing, and particularly who he is in relation to this Jesus. Exodus 15 too is a response to encountering the presence of God. After the exodus event Israel rejoices in praise. Often God’s mighty acts prompt the psalmists to compose their praises. The Covenant Lord is present in his miraculous

deeds.

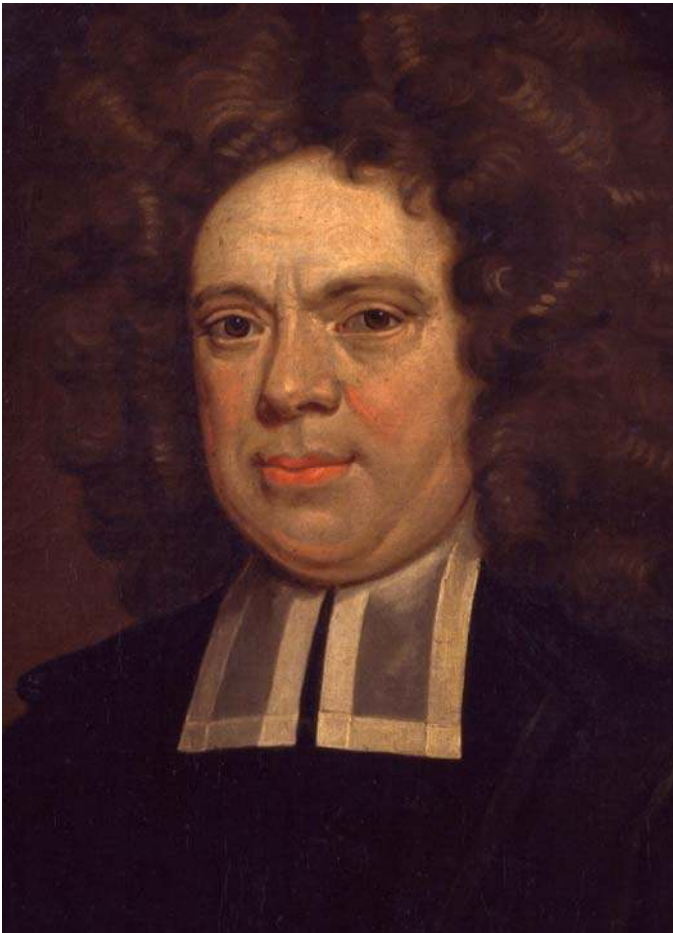
All of this points to a greater and more Biblical way of understanding miracles. They are manifestations of the Covenant Lord. They reveal God's authority, control, and presence to us. Thinking about miracles rightly means thinking of them in this sort of way. God may sometimes use natural or supernatural means to manifest himself. He may sometimes communicate his deeds immediately or mediate them through other means. But however He does it, He is revealing Himself to us in such acts. The Covenant Lord is present, powerful, and authoritative. Thinking about miracles in this way can help us avoid some of the unbiblical presuppositions behind other definitions, and can help us to stay grounded in the Scriptures. Miracles are extraordinary manifestations of our Covenant Lord. Such a definition helps us to preserve God's right relationship to the world.

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## What Matthew Henry Can Teach Us about Prayer

By Joey Tomlinson



**In all of the time I have been a Christian and in all of the time I have served in my ministry at the local Church I have never heard anyone say the following sentence:** “I am satisfied with my prayer life.” For many in the local Church their prayer life is discouraging because they “tend to say the same old things about the same old things.”

My hope is that this brief article can be a starting point for you as you seek to have your mind renewed by the Scriptures on the joy of prayer. It is important to know from the onset that I am by no means an expert on prayer. I write this as a fellow pilgrim seeking to commune with God deeper today than I did yesterday. I hope that my personal study may encourage your walk with the Lord and enrich your prayer life.

In this article I aim to do three things. I’ll let you be the judge on whether or not I am successful. I want to give you a biblical definition of prayer; I want to give you Scrip-

tures that you can begin praying immediately; and I want to give you a puritan format for prayer from the perspective of one of my favorite puritans, Matthew Henry.

Matthew Henry was an English minister in the late 1600s and early 1700s and

his writings and ministry had an impact that has far outlasted his life. He has influenced men such as George Whitefield and Charles Spurgeon, and he can teach us much on the subject of prayer. The primary purpose of prayer is to *bring glory to God through communion with Him and this is our joy*. Let that sink in for a moment. The primary purpose of prayer is not to request things (although we may do so according to God's will). The primary purpose is to *know God*.

We may begin to know God by what Matthew Henry calls the *adoration* part of prayer. We need only to observe, mediate and pray three passages of Scripture to support this aspect of prayer in our lives. In the adoration part of prayer, we must "rouse" ourselves to take hold of God:

*"There is no one who calls upon your name,  
who rouses himself to take hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us,  
and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities." (Isaiah 64:7 ESV)*

In the adoration part of prayer, we must seek God's face.

*You have said, "Seek my face."  
My heart says to you,  
"Your face, LORD, do I seek." (Psalm 27:8 ESV)*

In the adoration part of prayer, we must give God glory.

*"Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;  
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness." (Psalm 29:2 ESV)*

The second aspect of prayer that deserves attention is that of *confession*. Matthew Henry states, "We must next take shame to ourselves, which is our due, and humble ourselves before him in the sense of our own sinfulness and vileness; and herein also we must give glory to him (Joshua 7:19) as our Judge, by whom we deserve to be condemned, and yet hope, through Christ, to be acquitted and absolved."

Confession for the believer is to see one's self as underserving of the grace of God, but thankful that in Christ there is *complete* forgiveness. The believer is completely forgiven for every past, present, and future transgression. Every ounce of God's wrath has been poured out on Christ on the cross for the believer. This should deeply promote the believer's communion with God. When confessing sin consider this passage in Ezra and consider praying it back to God:

<sup>6</sup> saying: "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my

*God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.” (Ezra 9:6 ESV)*

As a believer however, you cannot stop with just a confession of sin. Again, we must remember that in Christ we are forgiven. This passage from Romans can help to navigate our prayer toward the gospel:

*<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup> It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:23-26 ESV)*

Confession to God should naturally lead the believer to the third aspect of prayer Henry teaches us about. This third part of prayer is *petition*. The petition is a time for the believer to ask God for the grace to repent quickly and grow in godliness for the glory of God. And this is for our good. In addition to this it is an acknowledgment of a believer’s complete dependence upon God for everything. Consider praying these three passages of Scripture as you relate them to your individual life.

*“And now, O Lord, for what do I wait?  
My hope is in you.*

*<sup>8</sup> Deliver me from all my transgressions.*

*Do not make me the scorn of the fool!” (Psalm 39:7-8 ESV)*

*<sup>7</sup> “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Matthew 6:7-8 ESV)*

*<sup>14</sup> And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.” (1 John 5:14-15 ESV)*

The fourth aspect of prayer is that of *Thanksgiving*. Henry reminds us, “Our errand at the throne of grace is not only to seek the favor of God, but to ascribe to him the glory due his name, (Psalm 29:2) and that, not only by an awful adoration of his infinite perfections, but by a grateful acknowledgment of his goodness to us, which cannot indeed add anything to his glory, but he is pleased to accept of it and to reckon himself glorified by it, if it comes from a heart that is humbly sensible of its own unworthiness to receive any favor from God, that values the gifts and loves the Giver of them.”

This aspect of prayer may be the most difficult of them all. Because of our sinful nature, we tend to easily remember the negative things in our lives and we quickly forget the innumerable blessings from God. One of the practical ways I seek to remember my blessings is by documenting them. Also, I truly believe that if we would spend considerable time *reflecting* on the gospel graciously applied to our lives by the Holy Spirit, we would naturally spend more concentrated time in a posture of thankfulness. God freely saved us. We did nothing to deserve this. Our union with Christ exists only because the Holy Spirit has applied His [Christ] righteous actions to our lives. No matter what circumstance we find ourselves in, Christians have reason to be eternally grateful to God.

The final aspect of prayer that is profitable for our short study is the act of *intercession* in prayer. Henry defines this as an “address and supplication to God for others.” The Apostle Paul reaffirms this when he states, “...<sup>18</sup> praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints...” (Ephesians 6:18 ESV)

It brings glory to God when we pray for the salvation of others (1 Timothy 2:3-4). It follows the example of our Lord to be an intercessor for others (Philippians 2) and it is a means of grace by which God makes unbelievers see (2 Corinthians 4:4). Ultimately when we pray, there is no better example in all of Scripture then when our Lord taught his disciples to pray when he stated:

*<sup>5</sup> “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. <sup>7</sup> “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. <sup>9</sup> Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread, <sup>12</sup> and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. (Matthew 6:5-13 ESV)*

We would do well to cooperate with the Holy Spirit by allowing the Scriptures to be our navigation for our prayer lives. It is there that we will find joy in this wonderful gift God has given us.

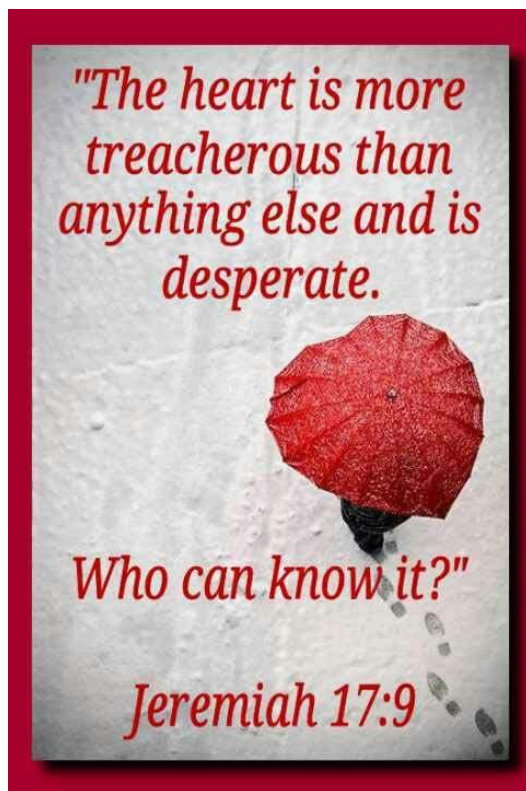
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- i. A phrase used often by Professor Donald S. Whitney in his book, *Praying the Bible*, Crossway, 2015.
- ii. This article will utilize aspects of Matthew Henry’s book, *A Method for Prayer*, Christian Heritage, 2015.



## Searching Hearts and Testing Minds: The God of Biblical Counseling

By Joshua Waulk



**The Gospels record that those who heard Jesus teach were “astonished”** and “amazed” by the authority with which He spoke (Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22; John 7:46). Whether Jew or Gentile, Jesus’s audiences were frequently captured, not only by His knowledge of God’s word, but by His commanding application of it to life.

Whereas the Scribes and Pharisees turned God’s righteous law into an impossible burden for the people to bear, Jesus brought hope through the Good News of God’s mercy and grace (Matthew 23:4; 11:28-30). Two thousand years later, we see that while technology has advanced, the biblical diagnosis of man’s heart remains the same—it is “...deceitful above all things, and desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9). Likewise, the source of all true hope for lasting change remains constant—there is “...no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

To be sure, the culture of modern man has its own unique blend of complexities when compared to that experienced by the first century church, but at the level of the heart, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Despite great gains in the realm of our understanding of the physical universe, we remain great sinners who suffer great pain, and who desperately need the redemptive hope of an infinitely greater God.

Like our first century forebears, we seek one who will speak with authority into the darkest recesses of our hearts. We intuitively know that life is not as it should be, and so we all, Christian and non-Christian alike, search for someone or something that will bring relief to the over-pressurized cabins of our fast-paced and trouble-filled lives. Here, we recall the words of St. Augustine, who in his *Confessions* wrote, “You made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its place of rest in You.” The question is, who is the “You” to which Augustine refers, how can we know Him, and what is He like? These questions all relate to the Doctrine of God, a foundational doctrine for true, biblical soul care.

### **A Doctrine Lost**

As Christians, we are called and privileged to draw near the same Jesus, the perfect God-Man and second person of the Trinity, who opened the minds of the early disciples, and who helped them find rest for their souls through a right understanding of the Scriptures (Matthew 11:28; Luke 24:25).

Sadly, the church at large throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, influenced by theological liberalism and modernity, moved away from Reformation principles such as *Sola Scriptura*. Increasingly, it embraced the theories of modern psychology for the care of souls, themselves devoid of and even set against Gospel categories such as the doctrine of sin, a robust Christology, and certainly a biblical Doctrine of God.

In recent years, a growing population within the church has embraced the movement of soul care known as biblical counseling. Biblical counseling can be described in a variety of ways, but at its core, its uniqueness, as compared to the multitude of ever-increasing secular counseling paradigms, is its rootedness in theology, to include an orthodox Doctrine of God.

While the Doctrine of Scripture (i.e. inerrancy, authority, sufficiency, etc.) is the focus of much of the attention from both proponents and opponents of biblical counseling (and understandably so), standing behind this debate is the belief in or denial of the God of the Bible who reveals Himself in its pages and who inspired its authorship from first to last (2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 11:1-2).

It can be argued, therefore, that the Doctrine of God is central to how or even whether the church will ultimately choose to care for souls according to the wisdom of God or the wisdom of man (Isaiah 55:8; 1 Corinthians 1:18). Knowing this God according to His character and His attributes, then, is of supreme importance to the task of counseling hurting and troubled lives. Why? Because all counseling theories have both a foundation and a destination. They either begin and end with man’s fallible and self-declared purposes for life, or they will have as their unique focus the God who searches the heart and tests the mind (Jeremiah 17:10). No counseling theory is neutral toward the Christian Doctrine of God (Matthew 12:30).

### **A Doctrine Rediscovered**

It has been observed that counseling theories attempt to answer, at a minimum,

the following three questions: (1) What or who is man? (2) What is the problem? (3) How is the problem resolved?

While most counseling sessions do not begin with an in-depth discussion of biblical or even secular anthropology, the basic assumptions held by the counselor and counselee regarding this particular question are always present, and therefore influencing the direction of counseling.

Is man an autonomous, self-sufficient being whose problems come from without and whose hope springs from within? Or, is he a created being who is utterly dependent on a transcendent Creator? Every counselor counsels out of an answer to these questions, and every counselee, at least at the start of counseling, will have already begun attempting to resolve their problems according to their held beliefs.

“Among other things, the Doctrine of God influences biblical counseling by instructing us that God is everything that we are not.”

If the answer is found in the former worldview, then any discussion of counseling biblically is moot. If, however, the answer is found in the latter, then the questions that beg to be answered are: (1) Who is this God? (2) What does He reveal about the nature of man’s problem? (3) How might He resolve what ails us?

The Doctrine of God, which develops from Scripture what we can know about His character and attributes, helps us to provide direct answers to the first question, which then helps pave the way to those that follow, including questions that relate to the doctrine of man. If God precedes man, and biblical counseling holds that He does, then the Doctrine of God helps us build the grid through which we observe and interpret the problems that people face, whether sin, suffering, or both.

Among other things, the Doctrine of God influences biblical counseling by instructing us that God is everything that we are not. Whereas secular counseling theories terminate on man, God himself is the biblical counselor’s destination. He is the One whose image the counselor works and prays to see restored in the heart of anxious, depressed, fearful, fighting, and grieving people (Genesis 1:26).

### **A Doctrine of Help and Hope**

If there is anything that must be said about the Doctrine of God as it relates to counseling and soul care, it is that the doctrine is not one of scholarly pursuits alone, but it is a doctrine for every believer that pours forth help and hope for hurting hearts and troubled minds.

Heath Lambert wrote, “Far too many Christians think that the God of the

Bible is a negotiable subject in the conversations we call counseling.” This is an unfortunate truth, because in the presence of God “... there is fullness of joy” (Psalms 16:11). The Doctrine of God is a vast expanse that covers a multitude of unique facets that invite us to know who God is. Whole chapters in books and volumes have been dedicated to exploring His omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, holiness, aseity, infinity, eternality, and other theological concepts. Not one is more important than another, and not one can be spared, for God is all of them all of the time in equal measure.

Within this great doctrine of the Christian faith, people who seek biblical counsel have the hope of discovering the God who transcends all that they are in what are known as His “incommunicable attributes,” that is, those things which He does not impart to man.

**And yet, they receive the hope that in His great love He invites them to partake of certain other attributes that He is well pleased to share,** that is, His “communicable attributes”. Through the redemption He offers them in Christ alone, the goals of true soul care are made known and possible.

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- ii. Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: the Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 133.
- iii. Ibid., 135

## Spiritual Warfare: How Christians Should Think of Satan and His Demons

By Joey Tomlinson



**Spiritual warfare, particularly in the area of demonology is quite neglected in many reformed churches.** This is a problem because it creates a vacuum for those whose position on demons and spiritual warfare is influenced more by unchecked testimonials and Hollywood than by the careful instruction of the Apostles documented in God's Word. C.S. Lewis said it best:

*"There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel and excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight" (Lewis 1942, ix).*

Christians are guilty of both extremes. Christians who are excessive about spiritual warfare and demonic activity make an unbiblical idol out of it and are in danger of living unproductive lives for the kingdom of God. Those who ignore it, are in danger of the sin of unbelief.

Charles Hodge cautions, “The rule of interpretation which gets rid of the doctrine of Satan and his influence, if carried out, would blot all the peculiar doctrines of the Scripture from the Bible” (Hodge, 1879). And J.C. Ryle agrees, “Unbelief about the existence and personality of Satan has often proved the first step to unbelief about God” (Ryle, 1955). Therefore, we begin this brief look at the influence of demonic activity, but we must be tethered to a text (and we will ground ourselves more as we move along).

*“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm” (The Apostle Paul, Ephesians 6:10-13 ESV).*

### **Where Did the Devil and Demons Come From?**

Before we go any further in looking at the Ephesians 6 passage of Scripture, we must identify the Devil and his demons and briefly identify their origin. We understand that the serpent in Genesis 3 is in the Garden of Eden before the fall of man. This serpent is analogous to Satan and his work as he tempts Adam and Eve to distrust God and worship the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1). Because the serpent is in the Garden before the fall of man, we must deduce that the serpent is older than man. Revelation 20:2 confirms this when the Apostle John states, “And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years...”

Although we know that Satan, and consequently demons, and demonic activity existed prior to the creation of man and life as we know it, the Scripture doesn’t give any sort of narrative about how this all came about. The closest thing to a narrative is found in two Old Testament passages. Theologian John Frames says of these two passages, “Scripture does not narrate the fall of Satan and his angels, but Isaiah 14:3-21 and Ezekiel 28:2-19 deal with the defeat of the kings of Babylon and Tyre, respectively, using imagery suggesting analogies with the fall of Satan” (Frame 2013, 775).

Reverend and Professor Frederick S. Leahy seeks to give us a bit more insight into the origin of Satan and I am indebted to him for his careful handling on the subject. He states:

*Satan revolted against God and became the leader of all other rebel angels. Under his rule they are joined in a confederacy of evil and consequently we read of ‘the devil and his angels’ and ‘the prince of demons’. He is given such names as Satan (adversary), Devil (slanderer), Apollyon (destroyer) and Belial (worthlessness or wickedness). The Jews called him Beelzebub and regarded*



*him as Prince of the demons. Satan is also termed the Dragon (a name associated with pagan powers in their opposition to the people of God, Ezekiel 29:3; Jeremiah 51:34) and Serpent (Revelation 20:2), a name which reminds us of his cunning (Leahy 1975, 19-0).*

Later Leahy asserts that Satan is known for his “power, malice, cunning and hostility (20). It is important for us to see the biblical evidence for Leahy’s comments. Lucifer (Isaiah 14:12-15), is in fact called the Devil and Satan which means “accuser” or “slanderer”. He is in fact crafty (Genesis 3:1) and can “anticipate well the plans of God” (Frame 2013, 776). And he is accompanied by his fallen angels that promote hostility toward God and his plan (Luke 13:11, 16; Acts 10:38; 2 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:18). Jude 6 gives us some insight into the origin of demons, “And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day...”

### **What Is Their Goal?**

Having briefly surveyed the origin of Satan and his fellow demons, we must give attention to their goal. In this we interact with our original passage in Ephesians 6. According to our primary text, they promote evil so that the man of God may not be strong in the Lord. Now, this is a very broad job description but other passages of Scripture can give us specifics about the cunning plan of Satan and his demons. Satan and demons “ceaselessly oppose God and strive to deflect his will” (Leahy, 19). In Genesis 3 we see Satan convincing Eve and consequently Adam to distrust God and to become jealous of His knowledge and position. In Job, Satan attempts to take everything good from Job in an attempt to convince Job to curse God. Ephesians 6:16 says that Satan and his demons throw “flaming darts” at believers. In 1 Peter 5:8-9, the Apostle Peter warns, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”

The ultimate goal of Satan is to *make man like him in his refusal to worship the only true and Sovereign God, Yahweh*. The Apostle Paul puts language around this goal:

*“For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” Late Paul goes on to say, “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done” (Romans 1:21-23; 28).*

Satan’s goal for the unbeliever is to keep them in their unbelief by tempting them to continue to suppress the knowledge of God that is plain to them (Romans 1). He may do this through a myriad of practical tactics. Two main idols that promote unbelief is sexual immorality and greed. Our culture can’t get enough of either and the church must speak to these so that the broader culture may repent of the sin of unbelief.

For the believer, the aim is that of the Accuser. Accusations may come like this: “Christ’s sacrifice did not atone for this sin” or “God would never use someone as messed up as you”. The temptation from Satan isn’t always accusatory though. It may come in the form of “you are forgiven, so indulge your flesh a little more” (see Romans 6:1). “You can’t expect to pursue sexual morality in today’s culture” (1 Corinthians 6:12-20). Satan’s aim is to steal the joy of the believer and replace it with a withered, cheap, unquenchable idol.

### **We Will Overcome Because Christ Crushed the Head of the Serpent**

A brief survey of spiritual warfare and demonology would not be biblical or complete unless we acknowledge the universal Lordship of Jesus Christ. Two passages are of primary importance for us in our fight against “rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12). God says to Satan in Genesis 3:15:

*“I will put enmity between you [Satan] and the woman [Eve], and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”*

“Jesus is seated and He won’t return until all enemies are made His footstool.”

God is preaching the triumphant message of the gospel of Jesus Christ immediately after the fall of man. Jesus is the great Snake Crusher. Through his life, death and resurrection He has crushed Satan and his limitless deceiving power. The work of Christ is accomplished and applied to His Church. He is now seated and ruling and reigning over heaven and earth. Hebrews 10:12-13 gives us a glimpse into this:

*“But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.”*

Jesus is seated and He won’t return until all enemies are made His footstool. That tells us that there is still a spiritual war for Christians to engage in. However, the war has already been fought and won. Our job is to announce the victory of war to the nations (Matthew 28:18-20) and to allow the triumphant message of the gospel make Christ’s enemies his footstool.

### **Where Does this Leave Satan?**

Satan is bound. I preached a sermon not too long ago where I attempted to illustrate the current position of Satan. When I was a young teenager growing up in Southern Georgia, I killed a rattlesnake with the help of an older teenage friend. After we killed the snake, my friend and I thought that it would be funny to put the snake

on my parent's front porch and knock on the door. I remember vividly my mom's reaction to seeing a snake on her porch. Now, if you aren't familiar with killing snakes, when they first die they still move and they can still bite you. In some ways, the bite of a dead rattlesnake can be more harmful than the bite of a live snake. This is because a snake's venom is unregulated after death. I learned that valuable lesson from my parents who later explained that to me.

The point is, the snake was defeated, but not powerless. I believe this is an appropriate way to view the work of Satan. Christ has defeated him, but the New Testament writers still warn us to resist and flee him. The beauty of this is that God has deposited His Holy Spirit in every believer and with that comes the ability to resist the devil for the glory of God. It is a Christian's joy to do so.

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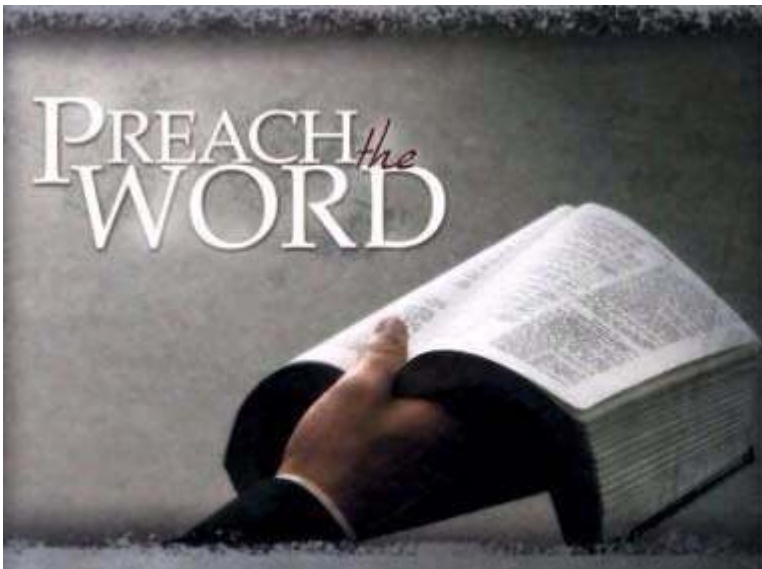
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## Preaching the Doctrine of God

By Dave Jenkins



**In the contemporary evangelical movement, we are seeing all sorts of attacks on the doctrine of God.**

From neglect of teaching on this particular doctrine to weird ideas as it relates to the Trinity and more, over the past century, we've seen this doctrine under attack. Understanding the Doctrine of God is critical to have a right view of a whole host of topics such as salvation, the Bible, the

church, and ministry. God opens His Word with the declaration He is there, and He is not silent, but active and sovereign over it. In this article we will look at how God is a preacher, God calls preachers, God indwells preachers through the Holy Spirit, God equips preachers, and God sends preachers. We will then turn in the last part of the article to look at two practical ways to preach the doctrine of God, and then conclude with a suggested sermon series on the doctrine of God.

### God is a Preacher

Within the first three verses of Genesis 1, we see God opening His Word with the opening sermon. The very first words of God recorded in the Bible are, "And God said, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3). God continued to speak, and creation came into existence. Dr. Jason Meyer is right when he notes, "Many miss the theological saturation here because few people think of speaking as an essential and exciting theological term. This attitude is a mistake. We should not minimize the jaw-dropping fact that God is a speaking God. The implications are enormous. The author of the Pentateuch also seems to be fixated on God's speech. Forms of the word "say" occur

nine times in rhythmic repetition (Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 26, 28,-29). God is the subject of all of them.”

All of creation is God’s servant. As John Calvin said, creation is a theater for the display of the glory of God. The greatest demonstration of God as a preacher outside of creation itself is Jesus- the God-Man. Jesus lived thirty-three and a half years. The last three and a half years of His life until His death was spent preaching, teaching, performing miracles, and training His disciples.

### **God Calls Preachers**

Every Christian is called to minister. Every Christian is to serve the Body of Christ for that is part and parcel of the Christian life. The New Testament makes this clear in multiple passages. 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12-14 and Romans 12 show how God gifts every believer to function in the Body of Christ. As each believer fulfills his or her God-assigned role, the church is strengthened, and the believer increases in fruitfulness. In Ephesians 4, Paul explains that pastors, ministers, and evangelists are given for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry. All saints- regardless of their vocation—are to be active in building up the Body.

The other component to this is someone might be called to ministry. They may have a job with a direct ministerial component to it. You do not have to meet 1 Timothy 3 qualifications or be ordained for this role, but you have consciously chosen to walk through a door of ministerial service—for example, as a children’s ministry coordinator, a teacher at a Christian school, or Christian camp counselor.

Called to the ministry is defined in the New Testament in places like Ephesians 4:11-16, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, and Titus 1:6-9. As we read the Bible, we see God setting aside men for the specific task of preaching. In the Old Testament, the primary preachers are the Priests and the Prophets; although the prophets are more prominent. The Priests would declare the Word of God already spoken. The Prophets would tell forth the Word of God. In the New Testament, we see God calling men to preach the Word. From Jesus, the Twelve Apostles, the Disciples, the early Church Fathers, the Reformers, on up to the present with Pastors and Teachers of God’s Word. The qualification for a man called to be an Elder is he will be apt to teach (1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1).

In Ephesians 4:11-12, Paul says, “<sup>11</sup> And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,” In the main, the church has long understood the office of apostle and prophet as reserved for the first century, ceasing to exist with the death of the apostles and the completion of the New Testament. In this article, we will only then consider the office of pastor, evangelist, and teacher.

Whatever their distinctions, these offices all share one common charge: minister the Word. The same charge falls upon overseers. This is why, in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Paul lists only one skill “able to teach” alongside the many character qualities an overseer must have. A call to ministry is a call to the Word of God. A call to preach or teach the Word is the distinguishing mark of a call to ministry.

This is not to suggest that only those with a formal preaching position are truly called to the ministry but that those called to the ministry are called first to teach or preach the Word, and should undertake their ministry accordingly. The ministry of the

Word can show up in many different venues, including worship leadership, counseling sessions, college ministries, classroom lectures, and the like.

Whether you are called to minister, called to ministry, or called to the ministry, your service matters. Every Christian has a holy duty to do his or her work unto the Lord. God calls and commissions. John Newton, the infamous slave trader who became a gospel minister and penned the immortal hymn “Amazing Grace” observed, “None but he who made the world can make a minister of the gospel.” It is indeed a holy summons; ministers are set apart by a holy God for a holy work.

### God Indwells Preachers Through the Holy Spirit

Charles Spurgeon’s understanding of the connection between the Holy Spirit, prayer and preaching is paradigm shifting. His understanding of the connection between preaching and the ministry of the Holy Spirit is not new, but it does need to be brought to the forefront for the modern reader. John Broadus in *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* stated that “The ultimate requisite for the effective preacher is complete dependence upon the Holy Spirit.” Dr. Bryan Chapell teaches that the biblical description of the Spirit’s work challenges “All preachers to approach their task with a deep sense of dependence upon the Spirit of God.”

“The foundations for understanding the ministry of the Holy Spirit in preaching comes from John 14:16-17.”

Dr. Sinclair Ferguson notes that “Little attention has been given in recent literature to the role of the Spirit in relationship to preaching.” Dr. Eswine explains that “Spurgeon’s intentional explicitness regarding the work of the Holy Spirit in preaching offers reasonable explorations into deeper caverns of intricacy, which may enable an infant theology on the Holy Spirit to take more steps.”

Charles Spurgeon believed that “the Spirit of God was precious to the people of God, and therefore sought to make the person and work of Christ the main focal point of his preaching and instruction to other preachers.” Dr. Heisler gets to the heart of what happens when the preacher understands the relationship between the Word and the Holy Spirit when he teaches that “When the Word and the Holy Spirit combine, combustion happens and power results.” He continues explaining that “Spirit-led preaching thrives on the powerful and inseparable tandem of the Word and Spirit.”

The biblical foundations for understanding the ministry of the Holy Spirit in preaching comes from John 14:16-17. Jesus, in this passage, identifies the Holy Spirit as the “Spirit of Truth.” The Spirit of Truth is sent by the Father at the request of the Son and indwells believers as a resident minister who guides believers into all truth. Jesus elaborates on the Spirit as the guide into all truth when he said in John 16:13, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will



not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”

Jesus identified the Spirit’s ministry as a continuation of His own ministry; in fact, John 14:16-18 makes it clear that the Holy Spirit is of the same kind (Deity) as Jesus. The Spirit reveals and glorifies Christ by magnifying Christ’s teaching, Christ’s gospel, and Christ’s work as the grand fulfillment of God’s redemptive plan. The Bible is united in its testimony to Jesus Christ, and the Spirit’s joy is giving witness to this testimony to the people of God. Spirit-led preaching comes into alignment with the Spirit’s ministry of glorifying Jesus Christ by proclaiming the written Word in order to glorify the living Word.

“...the Spirit is Christ-centered, and the preacher is to be Christ-centered.”

Dr. Greg Heisler notes that “Spirit-led preaching is the biblically defined ministry combined with the theological relationship between the Word and the Spirit. This combination demands Christ-centered preaching.” “The biblical and theological foundation, he explains, for the Word and Spirit in preaching is seen in the fact that the Scriptures are Christ-centered, the Spirit is Christ-centered, and the preacher is to be Christ-centered.

The Scriptures are Christ-Centered: John 5:39 states, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me.” Luke 24:27 explains, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” John 20:30-31 says, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

The Spirit is Christ-Centered: John 14:26 says, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” John 15:26, “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.” John 16:13-14, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

The preacher is to be Christ-Centered (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 4:5), “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.” Acts 28:31 says, “Proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:23 also states, “But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.” These three categories form, according to Dr. Heisler, “the foundation for Spirit-led preaching.”

Spurgeon understood the importance of preaching the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit which is why he notes that:

*The gospel is preached in the ears of all; it only comes with power to some. The*

*power that is in the gospel does not lie in the eloquence of the preacher; otherwise, men would be converters of souls. Nor does it lie in the preacher's learning; otherwise it would consist in the wisdom of men. We might preach till our tongues rotted, till we should exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless there were a mysterious power going with it the Holy Ghost changing the will of man. Oh, Sirs! We might as well preach to stone walls as preach to humanity unless the Holy Ghost be with the Word to give it power to convert the soul.*

Dr. John Stott notes that “preachers must be humble in mind (submissive to the written Word of God), have a humble ambition (desiring an encounter to take place between Christ and His people), and a humble dependence (relying on the power of the Holy Spirit).” Preachers must aim to be faithful to God’s Word by lifting up the glory of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The confidence the preacher has must come from heartfelt knowledge of the Word of God by dwelling richly upon the Word, which is truth. Only in this way will the preacher know the Truth they profess and be able to bear testimony about the Cross demonstration of Word and Spirit.

Paul, in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 4:12, gets to the heart of why preachers and teachers of the Word of God must be surrendered wholly to the Lord when he says, “So death is at work in us, but life in you.” The challenge of preaching is to grow in the task while giving it away, being willing to die for people so that they may live. Death-to-self is demanding, but necessary so that the preacher may become like Christ, who died so that His people may live. Furthermore, if preachers will not die to self, the people they minister to will not live. The pulpit is a place to present a translucent soul laid over the vicarious suffering of the Lord Jesus, modeling His sacrifice.

Robert Murray M’Cheyne in a letter to his friend Andrew Bonar taught his friend to the following: “Remember you are God’s sword—His instrument—I trust a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity and reflections of the instrument will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hands of God.

“Understanding the theology of the Holy Spirit in the life and thought of Spurgeon is important, but it is equally vital for preachers today to know how seriously Spurgeon took his own spiritual growth.”

Spurgeon’s spirituality emerged from the Word of God. As Raymond Brown expressed it, “His spirituality was essentially a Biblical spirituality.” Spurgeon was a man deeply influenced by the Puritans and as such believed that the Gospel was for all of life. Spurgeon “believed in a disciplined spirituality which to him meant diligent, meditative study of the Scriptures.”

Understanding the theology of the Holy Spirit in the life and thought of Spurgeon is important, but it is equally vital for preachers today to know how seriously

Spurgeon took his own spiritual growth. Spurgeon's ministry was grounded in the Word of God and prayer and fueled by the Holy Spirit. Spurgeon was a man of God, set ablaze with a passion for declaring the majesty of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

### God Equips Preachers

Not only does the apostle Paul want those of us in the church to know that we are the same—and that is a good thing; he also requires us to understand that we are all different—and that is a good thing, too. The emphasis on our sameness encourages equal regard for one another despite our differences. The emphasis upon the legitimacy of our differences encourages equal respect for our differences.

*How are we different?* One way we are different is that we have differing gifts. Christ “gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11). In this passage, Paul clearly establishes that God has gifted the leaders of the church in different ways (Ephesians 4:11) and in different proportions (Ephesians 4:7)—and that this is all right. Also, we should understand that if there are such differences in the church's leaders, then surely there are differences among the church's people as well. These differences are often an irritation to us. It seems as though the world and the church would be so much better if everyone were more alike. What's wrong with wanting most persons to be the same ... just like us? The apostle deals with this question before he ever begins to describe the differing gifts (Ephesians 4:7–10).

*How should we regard our differences?* Paul says that we should recognize that the differing gifts are *derived from Christ's authority* (Ephesians 4:7–10). Our different personalities, abilities, and experiences are gifts that God provides us so that we will bring many different talents and perspectives for building and extending Christ's church. No one has all the gifts needed for every challenge the church will face. The Holy Spirit gives us different gifts for different purposes in the church. The sweet side of this reality is that we have complementary strengths, weaknesses, interests, and personalities. The distasteful side is that these differences cause us to get on each other's nerves. Too often we end up singing our personal versions of the song from *Cinderella*, “Why can't she be more like me?” The simple answer is that God did not make that person like you. Christ apportioned the gifts differently among us (Ephesians 4:7), and he has the authority to do so (Ephesians 4:8–10).

Paul also says that we should recognize the differing gifts are *reflective of Christ's generosity* (Ephesians 4:8). We also respect these differences because we have Christ's gifts through his generosity. Christ does not ask us to respect the gifts he grants merely because they reflect his authority, but also because they reflect his generosity. In his death, resurrection, and ascension Christ imprisoned the power of sin over us. Our bondage to Satan, sin, and death is itself made captive to the power of Christ so that it has no hold over us (Eph. 4:8). Rather, we have been captivated by Christ's love and are pictured as trailing in his victory parade as he ascends to heaven. The further implication of the apostle's words (indicating that the gifts we now possess are connected to Christ's victory and the defeat of sin) is that the gifts he dispenses to us are his means of restraining the power of sin now. In this sense, our gifts reflect the most essential and precious aspects of our Savior's being. The gifts are not merely material objects or per-

sonality traits but rather are Christ's sharing of himself. The gifts given to you and me—we who are the body of Christ—are the extension of Christ's very heart and being to his people. He is offering himself in all the manifold riches of his glory in the various ways that he is gifting his church.

We gain fresh and tender appreciation of the Savior and those about us when we see that the variety of the gifts is an expression of the great generosity of Jesus. In this variety, he is sharing more of himself than can be contained in any one of us. Not any one of us has to do all the work of the kingdom because Christ has not given all of his gifts to any one person. You will feel the generosity of this when you realize that the entire work of the church does not depend on you. God has been generous to us in taking from us the need to feel that we can or must do everything by ourselves for the church to survive.

Finally, Paul says that we should recognize the differing gifts are *intended for Christ's purposes* (Ephesians 4:12–15). The reasons for the Lord's authority and generosity in dispensing his gifts become evident in the purposes of the gifts. Paul says that Christ gives the gifts so that leaders may be able to equip others for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12a).

Christ does not want us to spend his gifts upon ourselves, nor let them lie dormant; we are to use them to build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12b). Our lives are purchased with Christ's blood and are not our own (Revelation 5:9). Already in verse 11, the leaders themselves have been identified as gifts to the church. The leaders receive from the Lord the gift of the capacity to do their roles, and thus these Spirit-gifted leaders are themselves equipped to embody God's gifts to the church.

Leaders are expected to use their gifts to equip God's people for works of service, and these works of service build up the body. Paul builds this understanding with a key distinction in the three prepositional phrases (v. 12) of this sentence. The sentence literally says Christ gave some to be pastors and teachers "to the equipping of the saints *unto* works of service, *unto* the building up of the body of Christ"). The first phrase states the purpose of God's giving the leaders; the second phrase indicates the consequence of the leaders equipping the saints, and the last phrase gives the overall result of the leaders and (other) saints working together in the body. This idea of leaders equipping others so that all are involved in works of service is consistent with Ephesians 4:16. There the focus on leaders combines with the body metaphor in requiring "each part" (not just the leaders) to work for the up-building of Christ's church (cf. 4:7). Each gift has triple ownership: ours, the Church's, and God's. But the last owner is the most significant and worthy, and so it is most important that we steward these gifts for his purposes.

Those purposes are also spelled out. The first is unity. The body is to be built up for unity in faith and knowledge (Eph. 4:13a) so that we will not be blown about by every wind of doctrine and by deceptive teaching (Eph. 4:14). As the thoughts of verses 13a and 14 are connected, we understand that Christ's intention is that the church be of one mind in the truth it believes.

The second purpose is maturity. The body is also to be built up so that it will "become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph.

4:13b). The “fullness” of Christ is his transforming influence over the world through the church which is his body (Eph. 1:23; 3:19–20). As the thoughts of verses 13b and 15 are connected, we understand that Christ’s intention is that the church would express the truth in love so that all are growing up in (i.e., fulfilling) the purposes of him who is the head—not just of the church, but of everything (Eph. 1:22). We are to be united in mind

so that we can be maturing in ministry for the expression of faith that brings all things under the headship of Christ.

“Paul urges us not to despise our own gifts.”

In summary, we have different gifts authorized by Christ to be used to build us up in unity of mind regarding his commitment to truth and to build us up in maturity of ministry for world-transforming expression of his truth, so that all will be under the headship of Christ. When we begin to understand how great is the vision that

Paul has for Christ’s use of the gifts that God has given us, we should be sobered and newly inspired to offer the prayer of Francis de Sales, champion of the ministry of ordinary people: “Lord, give me the grace to be wholly yours.” When we pray in this way, we are asking that we would make a gift to him of the gifts he has given to us, and recognize that he has dispensed these various gifts to ordinary people with authority and generosity for the purposes of kingdom building that he alone knows, but that are more vast than we can imagine.

Paul also urges us *not to despise our own gifts*. Not only must we respect God’s authority by not despising others’ gifts, but we must also diligently avoid the trap of disregarding or disdaining the value of our own gifts (1 Cor. 12:14–20). We may never fulfill the purposes that God has for our lives if we constantly want to be something God has not designed us to be. Why do Christians fail to make good use of the gifts Christ has given them?

1. Some Christians do not understand that we are obligated to use the gifts that God gives for the building of his church (Rom. 12:4–8). Western mindsets of self-fulfillment may cause us not even to consider our obligation to steward what God has given us for the purposes of the One who purchased us with his own blood and gives us to fellow believers in the church. Failure to steward Christ’s gifts is simply sinful neglect of our calling.
2. Sometimes we do not want the obligation of our gifts. They may be in an area that requires sacrifice or does not bring worldly acclaim.
3. Neglect of our gifts can also be a result of our wanting others’ gifts. Instead of living for the Lord’s approval and purposes, we want the regard of other people in our particular setting. We may be gifted in business, but are envious of preachers because their life seems simpler, and the church offers them greater respect. We may be gifted in being a pastor, but want to be a professor, which seems to be a simpler life. We may be gifted in relationships but want to excel in academics because we would prefer to be known as smart rather than caring. We may be gifted in prayer but give it no time because the rewards are private and not public. There is nothing wrong with

wanting to excel, but there is everything wrong with not approving the way that God made you and driving yourself to excel in ways he has not gifted you. Happiest are those who discover Christ's gift and give themselves to excel in what God has made them to do—whether that is preaching or teaching or evangelizing or writing or making music or making money or giving counsel or showing hospitality or creating art—according to the gift that the Lord God has given.

In light of God's gifting us for his purposes, we must ask ourselves these important questions: "Am I doing what God has made me to do or am I neglecting my gift? Am I delighting to be what God has made me to be, or am I despising my gifts?" The Christians that I know who have made the greatest shipwreck of their lives (for reasons other than blatant sin) are those who have not been satisfied with fulfilling the calling of their specific gifts. They always wanted to be someone else. If you despise what God has made you to be, you will never find the satisfaction that he intends for you. Love what God has made you to be and believe that he is using you even in difficult places. Such confidence that he is giving himself to the church through you will be the source of the deepest satisfaction of your life.

Finally, Paul urges us *not to neglect others' gifts*. Mature leadership seeks to equip others to use their gifts for the work of ministry and to build up the body (Eph.

"*Mr. Holland's Opus* is a movie about a dedicated music teacher who dreams of becoming a famous composer."

4:12). The work of ministry is not dependent on any one of us, even those who are leaders. Our task is to equip others for their ministry of service and building up of the church. Here is the message: if you try to do it all, you will die and the ministry will, too. There is simply too much to be done: Bible studies, youth groups, diaconal ministries, educational ministries, mercy ministries, campus ministries, singles ministries, outreach to the workplace and on the campus, Right to Life, political advocacy, art ministries, public school board meetings, Christian school meetings, homeschool meetings—the list is endless.

We who are leaders have the important job of making ourselves nonessential for the doing of all the church's ministries because we are to be so equipping others that their efforts will not be dependent on us. Our essential task is to equip others for the ministry of the church. This is an important educational concept for the church that often will expect the minister or paid staff to do everything (and we can feed that expectation by trying to do everything). Yet if we make ourselves essential to every project and activity, then the church can never do more than the leadership can stretch itself to do. Christ's goal is that the church leaders would prepare others for ministry by equipping every person to do his or her part.

*Mr. Holland's Opus* is a movie about a dedicated music teacher who dreams of becoming a famous composer. He does not have those gifts and, instead, makes an



impact he does not fully appreciate in the lives of a generation of students in his high school music program. Mr. Holland never writes the musical opus that will make him famous but pours himself into the young people before him: a redheaded girl with pig-tails who struggles to play the clarinet, a football player who cannot keep rhythm but needs a band credit to keep his game eligibility, a street kid who is mad at the world but who discovers the beauty of his own soul in music.

As the movie concludes, Mr. Holland is fighting budget cuts for the survival of the high school's music program. He loses. And he retires. The last day of school he

"Together we are the transforming power of the Church, Christ's great opus."

cleans out his desk and, with shoulders slumped down, walks the school hall for the last time. He is a picture of dejection, reminding us of a life spent without a dream fulfilled. But as Mr. Holland walks, he hears noise in the auditorium. He goes in to see what is happening and faces a packed auditorium of students and alumni thundering an ovation and chanting his name. The little girl with pigtails is now the governor of the state, and she addresses Mr. Holland from the podium. "Mr. Holland, we know that you never became the famous composer you dreamed of being. But don't you see it today? Your great composition is what you did with us, your students. Mr. Holland, look around you. We are your great opus. We are the music of your life."

Each of us is the music—the great opus—of those who have used their gifts to equip us. And I pray that we will know the joy and fulfillment that comes from knowing that we have used our gifts for the equipping of others for their works of service in the kingdom of God. We may not become famous before men, but we fulfill the purposes of heaven when we use what God has given us for the purposes he has designed for us in equipping others for the work of ministry and the building up of the church. A couple whose marriage is healed, a young man in a distant nation brought to faith, a grieving mother next to an empty cradle brought comfort, a preacher boldly proclaiming the word—all these are the works of service that we are equipping others to fulfill as we minister with the gifts that Christ has given. Together we are the transforming power of the Church, Christ's great opus.

### God Sends Preachers

*Romans 10 14-15*, <sup>14</sup>How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? <sup>15</sup>And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

The words "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" are a quotation from Isaiah 52 and the seventh verse. You see the picture of swift-footed messengers coming over the mountains to the people of God, and they have the most thrilling news. Their captivity in Babylonian exile, prisoners of war for 70 years, is ending, the days of exile have passed, and restoration is at hand. "How delightful is the approach of such fleet-footed men! See them running towards us so fast because their

news is great!" That is what Isaiah says, and he is telling the people that this will one day happen to them. They were going to rejoice on tip toe seeing men in the distance racing with all their might towards them!

But Isaiah has something more wonderful in mind than the restoration from Babylonian captivity because he prophesies later in the chapter that "All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God" (Isa. 52:10). Deliverance of the Jews from captivity in Babylon is a mere picture of Christians in the nations of the whole world throughout the following centuries being delivered from their bondage to sin. Good news for all the nations and this is why Paul interprets the prophecy as referring to every preacher of the gospel. Preachers are the ones who bring better news of a greater deliverance from worse captivity to a grander freedom.

This is the perspective that we should have of our congregations in our word-centered worship with its climax the preaching of the great Deliverer, Jesus Christ. We gather each Sunday with a spirit of thanksgiving, and amazement, and exhilaration. How beautiful is the approach of our pastors going up and up the steps from the minister's room into the pulpit with the elders accompanying him into the meeting! Beautiful feet because they come to declare to us a beautiful message.

What authority, then, has the preacher? Earlier in the verse Paul puts it like this: "How are they to preach unless they are sent?" He's implying that preachers are sent by God himself. One of the marks of false prophets in the Old Testament was that God had not sent them. "I did not send the prophets," he said, "yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied" (Jer. 23:21). The word 'apostle' comes from this verb 'to send', and although Christ's preachers today are not apostles in the original sense, they are still truly men sent by God. Without a divine sending, there can be no true preachers.

The verb 'to preach' ("How are they to preach?") reinforces the idea of authority, for it refers to a herald, and a key point about the herald was that his message was not his own. It was entrusted to him by supreme authority, by the king, the emperor, the general. He was the bearer of an official message from a higher power. In ancient times, the person of the herald was inviolate. No matter how bitter the enmity between two nations might be, no matter how fierce the battle that was raging, one herald approaching the enemy must not be harmed, for he was simply the message-bearer of his master. So the preacher is the herald of Almighty God, and we are bringing our master's words to humans. This is our authority.

Even the main verb in the text — "preach the good news" — supports this idea. Although it is the word from which 'evangelize' comes and refers more to the content of the message as 'good news,' we cannot evacuate it entirely of the idea of authority. For the Greek word 'evangel' was a known secular word, used of an official announcement about some change in the affairs of the state, such as the birth of a son to the emperor, or a change of governor in a province. A new situation was arising, and an official proclamation — an 'evangel' — would be made announcing this new situation and its implications. So when the early Christians used this word, they were taking it not only from the Old Testament but also from contemporary society, and with a meaning relevant for the culture in which they found themselves. It was

fitting that the four documents at the beginning of the New Testament came to be known as 'evangels,' 'gospels' — official announcements of a major new state of affairs in the world. That is the word used here.

What is this good news? Quite simply, it is salvation. Paul loves to use that word over and over again. In verses 9, 10, and 13 he has emphasized it repeatedly: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved . . . With the mouth, one confesses and is saved . . . Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." This is the good news — 'saved' — saved from sin, from wrath, from death, from the devil, from hell. The good news is that we may be saved in our bodies and in our souls, saved for joy, for holiness, for fulfillment, for God. We may be saved for an endless, abundant life in heaven. God has done something by which we may be saved. The Lord Jesus Christ was sent into the world by the Father to seek and to save that which is lost. If he has come for us, and found us, and died for us, and lives in heaven interceding for us then how can we be lost? He has saved us. Great news! We are safe because of what the Son of God has done for us.

"How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news." All Christian preaching is connected with this salvation. The whole Bible tells us how to work out this salvation, how to experience it more fully, how to become more like the Lord Jesus, how to bring him glory — good news from beginning to end!

Christians are people who call on the name of the Lord. Such was the testimony of the psalmist: "The snares of death encompassed me... I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the Lord: 'O Lord, I pray, deliver my soul!' Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful . . . When I was brought low, he saved me" (Ps. 116:3-6). The same phrase occurs often in the New Testament, in the opening verses of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, for example. Paul is writing to the church of God in Corinth, yet he wants to send the letter to all other Christians as well. Note how he describes them: "together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

When we stand up to open the Word, we have the thrilling assurance that we have a message appropriate for everyone who may hear us. We have something to say to every type, every condition, and every circumstance. What other message in the world is universal? What other message applies to everyone? None. "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

What then shall we say to these things? Surely, those of us who are ministers should give ourselves to preaching, should specialize in it, devoting our minds, hearts, and lives to being the best we can be as proclaimers of the Word of God. We should disregard the contempt of the world and the hardships of our calling. It is tragic to hear preachers, when they meet together, feeling sorry for themselves, complaining of the difficulties they face. Paul said, "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). We have the greatest privilege given to mortal men on this earth. Should we pity ourselves? Should we talk about sacrifice or giving up things? Never.

John Calvin comments on this text: 'We learn from this how much the preaching of the Gospel is to be desired by all good men . . . God bestows the highest praise on the

incomparable value of this treasure to awaken the minds of all men to desire it eagerly.” What a great glory it is to be a preacher of the gospel! May the Lord provide for us more and more preachers who love to proclaim the fame of God to the nations!

### **Practical Application: Preaching the Doctrine of God Means Proclaiming the Glory of God**

As we’ve considered in this article, God calls preachers, indwells preachers through the Holy Spirit, equips preachers, and sends preachers. He does all this and more to display His glory. We don’t proclaim our own glory through building a brand to suit our own ends. Instead, we proclaim the glory of God. It wasn’t by our own might or strength that we are saved. Instead, we are saved by God through the finished work of Jesus.

It’s tempting to think that if we get a certain amount of followers to our social media, blog, podcast, magazine, or some other platform that we might have that we might then be able to do some “significant” ministry. The truth is that the significant ministry is already here. If you have any sort of influence at all whether small or great God has given you, you should rejoice. Ministry is not about a book deal or traveling the preaching or conference circuit. Ministry is about getting into the trenches with hurting people and ministering to them there with the gospel. Ministry is about first loving the Lord and one’s spouse (if married).

True significant ministry is all around us. Homeless shelters are always in need of Bible teachers. Our college and seminaries need qualified godly preachers. Our true significance and lasting impact will not raise above our leadership of our homes.

Just last night my wife and I were having a conversation before I wrote this portion of this article. The conversation revolved around my future in ministry. Right now I’m pursuing applying for pastoral positions and seeking a call from a local church. I told my wife that I desire to be a good pastor. She smiled and nodded, I continued. I said I don’t desire just to be a good preacher. Again she smiled and nodded. I said what I desire is to be a great pastor. And she smiled. Then I said but above that all I want to love God supremely and you and for that to be the order because my leadership of our home is ultimately more important and gives rise to my ability to lead outside of this home.

“If we are truly about the glory of God and spreading a passion for the fame of God among the nations, we will not sacrifice our families.”

Often and I’ve seen this growing up in the Church so many times where pastors and ministry leaders care more about what’s going on in the church or in their ministry than they do in their homes. On both sides of my family, I have two great grandfathers who were pastors. They sacrificed their families on the altar of ministry. If we are truly about the glory of God and spreading a passion for the fame of God among the nations, we will not sacrifice our families. Instead, we will seek to be men

who are first shaped profoundly and deeply in our characters by the gospel. We will understand that using worldly means to promote ourselves at the end of the day doesn't bring God glory. Instead, it robs Him of glory. We can use the vehicles of modern technology to spread the gospel, but we must not be mastered by them. We have one Master and one Lord, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. We ought to be about His glory. Either we are about His glory or we are glorying in something else.

We must be about proclaiming the glory of God. We must practice what we preach. We must take seriously the message we've been given and consistently seek to use the means the Lord has given to us to accomplish eternal ends to the glory of God. This means first having our lives in alignment with His glory and then proclaiming the glory of God's grace to the nations through whatever means He has given us.

There are many great tools that God has given to us today. There is a desperate need for preachers to be saturated in the glory of God. We need preachers like the Prophet Isaiah who said woe is me. We need preachers who have been wrecked by their own sin and who are continually astonished at the marvelous grace of God. We need mighty men of valor and courage who will stand against the tide of a moral and spiritual wasteland that is our contemporary culture and proclaim the glory of God fearlessly. Steady yourself preachers before the greatness and majesty of our God. There you will find and know the true meaning of not just proclaiming the glory of God but the story and substance to sustain you through difficult days and blessed seasons of ministry.

### **Preaching the Doctrine of God Means Growing in the Ways of God**

As I tried to make clear in point number one of this section, it's not enough to just subscribe to a belief in the glory of God. It's one thing to say you are all about the glory but if your life doesn't align with God's glory you aren't living for the glory of God. Instead, you are living for the glory of yourself. As we continue to grow in our understanding of God and His ways, we will kill our need for self-glory. We will kill the desire to make a name for ourselves knowing that through Christ we are already as loved, accepted, and valued by God as we can be.

Preaching the doctrine of God means we will desire to grow in understanding of and experience of the ways of God. God has outlined in His Word the way that we must go. Through the Psalms, for example, the way of the righteous is contrasted with the way of the fool. Those who walk with God not perfectly but uprightly are called blameless. They have committed to walking in such a way as to bring God glory. Those who seek to live for their own glory are the fools. They would rather live life on their own terms and for their own pleasure than for what Psalm 16:11 calls pleasures forevermore. Pleasures forevermore are reserved for those who walk uprightly who know God and desire to delight in Him. Only those who are born again truly desire to walk with God. Those who walk in their own way desire only to build their own kingdom and live for self.

Each of us has times in our own lives where we struggle to live for the glory of God. We all stumble in many ways in our walk with God. If we are truly born again, we will not stay down. Instead, we will repent. We will desire to repent because we have been captivated by a vision of the glory of God. We understand that the glory of another, Jesus has come to die in our place and for our sin and rise again. We are not about our

own glory. Instead, we understand that Jesus desires to kill our desire to live for our own glory so that we might shine for His glory.

We must understand that we live not on our terms or for ourselves. Instead, we live for the glory of God. The more we understand this, the more we will desire to grow in understanding the ways of God. And the more we understand the ways of God, the more we will desire to experience and apply His Word to our lives. As Abraham Kuyper said, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!"

We must be like Isaiah and become humble and broken men knowing that it is not about us but God. We must become captivated like Isaiah by the glory of God and know that our mission is not our own. Instead, our mission is God's mission. We commit ourselves to the mission of God because of the glory of God. We are broken sinful men in need of Jesus. We must taste and know of His grace and drink from the deep, deep well of God's grace if we truly want to be effective in ministry. Our characters must be deeply formed by the glory of God so that we can stand fast in the midst of a moral and cultural revolution.

As preachers and teachers of the Word of God, we have a message to proclaim that challenges the very heart of our culture. We go forth at this cultural moment to proclaim the glory of God. We know this God is mighty to save but is also coming to judge the living and the dead. Let us go with a great sense of urgency and with passion girded by the truth and speak the truth in love seasoned with grace. It's not just our words that matter. As Paul said we must watch our doctrine and our lives. We must watch both because our doctrine drives our lives. When we get this wrong we will live by our feelings and proclaim what we "feel" is right. We must be steadied by sound biblical doctrine that honors and glorifies God. Only then will we proclaim the glory of God without fear and regret. No longer will we fear man. Instead, we will stand before men and proclaim the glory of God even as we grow in knowledge and experience of walking in the power of our great God and King through the work of His Holy Spirit.

### **Preach a Sermon Series on Topics Related to the Doctrine of God**

As this article comes to a close if you are a Pastor I encourage you to plan a series on the doctrine of God. As you've read this issue, hopefully, you've gotten a better understanding of the Trinity, the attributes of God, creation, God's providence, miracles, prayer, angels, and on Satan and demons.

One way among many to take what you've learned or discovered in this issue is to perhaps after you've gone through a book of the Bible to tackle one aspect of the doctrine of God. You could talk about prayer and spiritual warfare walking people through this topic or how understanding God's providence helps their Christian life. Or perhaps another series on the Trinity, or creation looking at Genesis 1-2.

Throughout the Bible, God has clearly spoken and fully revealed Himself. God's people need to know and understand the ways of the Lord. This is critical in



our fulfilling the charge that Paul gave the elders at Miletus in Acts 20 to preach the whole counsel of God. It is also vital in our ministry of equipping the saints for the work of ministry. God's people need to know the Lord and part and parcel of knowing God is being knowledgeable about His ways and walking in His ways. As you plan your sermon series for the next year, consider tackling one aspect of the doctrine of God covered in this issue. Not only will God's people be strengthened and further equipped but by God's grace, but perhaps you will grow yourself as you teach this precious doctrine to the Beloved of the Lord.

### Final Thoughts

Preaching the doctrine of God is vital. Growing in our understanding of God's way is for a lifetime as Christians. Wherever you are at in your Christian life today, God knows and sees. He hasn't left His people stranded on an island. Instead, He is with them. He walks alongside and goes before them. He is present with them. Preach the whole counsel of God. As you do, you'll end up touching on topics related to the Trinity, the attributes of God, creation, God's providence, miracles, prayer, angels, and Satan and demons.

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## Recommended Reading on the Doctrine of God

This season at Servants of Grace, we've been considering the Doctrine of God. We are living in a time where this doctrine is either neglected, under attack, or greatly misunderstood. With this issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, it was our hope that readers would grow, not only in their understanding of God and science but also the greater redemptive storyline of Scripture

If you've found this subject interesting and want to study the issue further, please check out the recommended reading list below. These books are at the top of this genre in both excellence and readability.

### Theology Proper

- *The Doctrine of God* by Herman Bavinck
- *Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* by D.A. Carson
- *The Existence and Attributes of God* by Stephen Charnock
- *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer
- *The Holiness of God* by R.C. Sproul
- *The Pleasures of God* by John Piper
- *The Doctrine of God* by John Frame
- *The Attributes of God* by A.W. Pink
- *Discovering the God Who Is* by R.C. Sproul
- *The Doctrine of God* by Gerald Bay

### The Doctrine of the Trinity

- *On the Trinity* by Augustine
- *The Forgotten Trinity* by James White
- *The Christian Doctrine of God* by Thomas F. Torrance
- *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* by Bruce Ware
- *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology and Worship* by Robert Letham

### **Providence and Predestination**

- *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* by Loraine Boettner
- *The Sovereignty of God* by A.W. Pink
- *Still Sovereign* by Tom Schreiner
- *Potter's Freedom* by James White
- *Chosen by God* by R.C. Sproul

In Christ Alone,  
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## About the Authors:



### ***Michael Boling***

Michael Boling lives in Belleville, IL, a suburb of St. Louis, MO with his wife Erica, adopted daughter Alissa, two cats Molly and Sweetie Pie and horse Beckham. Michael holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Religion (Biblical Studies) from Liberty University and is currently closing in on completing a Master of Arts in Religion (Biblical Studies) from Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary.



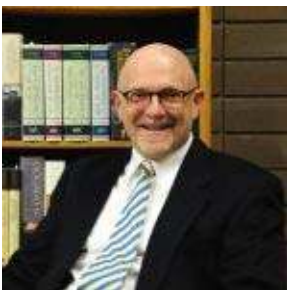
### ***Jason Helopoulos***

Jason is an ordained pastor in the PCA. He is an Assistant Pastor at University Reformed Church in East Lansing, Michigan. Jason is a regular blogger on the Gospel Coalition and Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals websites. He is also the author of *A Neglected Grace: Family Worship in the Christian Home*. He is married to Leah and they are blessed with two wonderful children, Gracen and Ethan.



### ***Joshua Waulk***

Joshua Waulk is the Founder and Executive Director of Baylight Counseling, a nonprofit biblical counseling ministry in Clearwater, Florida. He is married with four children, three of whom are adopted. Josh earned the MABC and is now pursuing the D.Min. in biblical counseling at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is ACBC certified.



### ***David Steele***

Dr. David Steele has been in pastoral ministry since 1991. He holds BS and MA degrees from Multnomah University and Multnomah Biblical Seminary and a D. Min from Bakke Graduate University. In 2012, he became the Senior Pastor at Christ Fellowship in Everson, Washington. He and his wife, Gerrene were married in 1991 and they have two children.

## About the Authors (Cont'd):



### ***Dave Jenkins***

Dave Jenkins is the Executive Director of [Servants of Grace Ministries](#), and the Executive Editor of [Theology for Life Magazine](#). He and his wife, Sarah, are members of Ustick Baptist Church in Boise, Idaho, where they serve in a variety of ministries. Dave received his MAR and M.Div. through Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary.



### ***Brian Cosby***

Brian Cosby (Ph.D. Australian College of Theology) is pastor of Wayside Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Signal Mountain, TN. He is Visiting Professor of Church History at Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta, and holds degrees from Samford University (B.A.), Beeson Divinity School (M.Div.), The North American Reformed Seminary (D.Min.), and the Australian College of Theology (Ph.D.).



### ***Joey Cochran***

Joey Cochran (Th.M., Dallas Theological Seminary) follows Christ, is the husband of Kendall, and the father of Chloe, Asher, and Adalie. He is the pastor of middle school discipleship and communication at Calvary Memorial Church in Oak Park, Illinois and a PhD student in Church History at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.



### ***Matthew Adams***

Matthew D. Adams serves as the Director of Youth and Family Ministries at First Presbyterian Church, PCA in Dillon, SC. He is currently a Master's of Divinity student at Erskine Theological Seminary in Columbia, SC. He lives in a small town by the name of Hamer, SC and is married to Beth.

## About the Authors (Cont'd):



### ***David Dunham***

Dave Dunham is Associate Pastor of Discipleship and Counseling at Cornerstone Baptist Church in the Detroit Metro. He has a Master's of Divinity from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.



### ***Jason Garwood***

Rev. Jason M. Garwood (M.Div., Th.D.) serves as Lead Pastor of Colwood Church in Caro, MI, and is the author of *Be Holy: Learning the Path of Sanctification*. Jason and his wife have three children.



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Executive Editor: Dave Jenkins

E-mail: [dave@servantsofgrace.org](mailto:dave@servantsofgrace.org)

Design Development Coordinator & Copy Editor:

Sarah Jenkins

Email: [sarah@servantsofgrace.org](mailto:sarah@servantsofgrace.org)